

**PSALMS
FOR YOU**

CHRISTOPHER ASH
**PSALMS
FOR YOU**



the goodbook
COMPANY

Psalms For You

© Christopher Ash, 2020

Published by:
The Good Book Company



thegoodbook.com | www.thegoodbook.co.uk
thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

Unless indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 2011 Biblica. Used by permission.

All rights reserved. Except as may be permitted by the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior permission from the publisher.

Christopher Ash has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

(Hardcover) ISBN: 9781784984168

(Paperback) ISBN: 9781784984151

Printed in India

Design by André Parker

CONTENTS

Series Preface	7
Introduction	9
1. At the entrance gate <i>Psalms 1 and 2</i>	15
2. The king's victory <i>Psalms 11 and 20</i>	41
3. The king's trust <i>Psalms 22 and 23</i>	45
4. The rock of refuge <i>Psalms 31 and 40</i>	59
5. Laments of a leader and people <i>Psalms 42 – 3 and 44</i>	75
6. The king under pressure <i>Psalms 57 and 59</i>	91
7. Songs of creation <i>Psalms 65 and 67</i>	107
8. Celebrating God's king <i>Psalms 45 and 72</i>	123
9. Pain in exile <i>Psalms 73 and 74</i>	139
10. Delight in home <i>Psalms 84 and 87</i>	157
11. Total security <i>Psalms 90 and 91</i>	173
12. Judgment and rescue <i>Psalms 95 and 107</i>	187
13. A betrayal and a promise <i>Psalms 109 and 110</i>	203
14. Going up to Zion <i>Psalms 122 and 126 – 128</i>	219
15. Pain and comfort in exile <i>Psalms 137 and 139</i>	235
16. The final Hallelujah <i>Psalms 145 and 148</i>	251
Glossary	265
Appendix: Psalms in the New Testament	275
Bibliography	279
Acknowledgements	281

SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Psalms For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- ESV: English Standard Version
- KJV: King James Version (also known as the Authorised Version)
- NRSV: New Revised Standard Version
- NASB: New American Standard Bible

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

Come, learn to pray!

In many parts of the Christian church today the Psalms are a neglected treasure: many churches are like a poverty-stricken house with incalculable riches forgotten, neglected, moth-eaten and dusty in the attic. Let us bring the Psalms out and revel in the wonder they offer—a fullness and richness of relationship with God undreamt of by so many of us half-starved Christians.

So I want to invite you to come with me on a journey to learn to pray.

This is exactly what the Psalms are in the Bible to do. The Psalms give a window into how Jesus learned to pray, in his fully human life; and they are how the people of Jesus are to pray as the Spirit of Jesus leads us in praying and praising by the Psalms.

The Psalms are in the Bible so that *all* the people of Jesus may learn to pray *all* the psalms *all* the time. What do I mean? Let's look at the opposite. Someone told me enthusiastically about a pastor who says he reads through the Psalms until a verse resonates with him; and then he dwells there for a period, until it ceases to resonate, at which point he moves on. It sounded wonderful—and yet it would be hard to find a more completely wrong approach to the Psalms! If I adopt this approach, it puts me in the driving seat; I decide what resonates with me, and then enjoy it. And the danger is that the psalms (or the verses) I select act like an echo chamber for my own desires and thoughts, amplifying my feelings, whatever they may be, and never challenging my thoughts or views.

The purpose of the Psalms is very different. In the Psalms we learn to pray corporately, with the church of Christ in every age. We learn to pray **Christocentrically***, with our prayers led by Jesus Christ, by whose Spirit we pray them. And we learn to pray empathetically, as we identify with the wider church and focus less on our individualistic

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 265).

(and often introspective) concerns. This will involve a massive **paradigm shift** for many of us, especially those of us nurtured in individualistic Western cultures, where the Christian life is a “me and God” thing, with the emphasis on “me”. Learning to sing and pray the Psalms will be a challenging affair, an unsettling experience, and yet a discipline that transforms us into the image of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus, whose own prayer life was shaped by these wonderful poems.

Come, learn to feel!

I also want to invite you to come with me on a journey to learn to feel.

Do you ever wonder what we are supposed to do with our feelings in the Christian life? Since about the 1960s, when the **charismatic movement** swept much of the **evangelical** world, there has been something of a sad divorce between what we call head (thinking) and heart (feeling). Some “do” feelings with energy and enthusiasm; in reaction to this, others “do” thinking. “You just think but don’t feel!” says one Christian to another. “Well, you feel but don’t think!” comes the reply. Neither is helpful.

I want to invite
you to come
with me on
a journey to
learn to feel.

The Psalms are God’s chosen way to engage our thinking and our feeling in a way that is passionate, thoughtful, true and authentic. The Psalms show us how to express our varied feelings; but, more than that, they reorder our disordered affections so that we feel deeper desires for what we ought to desire, more urgent aversion to that from which we need to flee, and a greater longing for the honour of God in the health of Christ’s church. The Psalms form within us a richer palette of rightly-directed emotions. It is not so much that the Psalms resonate with us as that they shape us so that we most deeply resonate with the God-given yearnings they so movingly express.

Who wrote the Psalms, when, and why?

The Psalms were written by a great variety of people over a long period of Old Testament history. The earliest psalm whose period we know is one by **Moses** (Psalm 90) from around the time of the **Exodus**. **King David**, centuries after Moses, was the pre-eminent psalmist, which is why the umbrella headline for the **Psalter** is “the Psalms of David”; about half the psalms have his name at the top. From the day the Spirit of God came upon him, when he was anointed by **Samuel** the prophet (1 Samuel 16), he began to sing songs that were inspired by the Spirit of the anointed king who was yet to come (see, for example, 2 Samuel 22, which became Psalm 18).

It was King David who made provision for societies of musicians who wrote and led Israel in psalms at the temple (see, for example, 1 Chronicles 16 and 25). From then on, right through the period of Israel’s kings, through the exile in Babylon and beyond, Spirit-inspired poets wrote psalms. Many come from subsequent generations of the song-writing societies founded by David (for instance, the psalms headed “of Asaph”); many others are anonymous. But, whether named or anonymous, these psalmists “prophesied” (see 1 Chronicles 25:1-3); that is, they wrote and sang by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of the Christ who was to come (1 Peter 1:10-12). We do not know quite how or when the Psalms were arranged, by inspiration of the Spirit of God, into their present order. We know that the last psalms were written no earlier than the exile in Babylon (see, for instance, Psalms 74 and 137). It seems likely that Books I and II were the earliest collection, that Book III was put together during or after the exile, and that Books IV and V were arranged last of all. The study of the arrangement of the Psalms is a hot topic in biblical scholarship.

God’s people sang these songs in Israel, in exile, and when they returned to the land, and were still doing so when Jesus walked in Judea. The Lord Jesus and the New Testament writers made much use of the Psalms. In Appendix 1 you will find a list of the most important Psalms quotations in the New Testament. The way they are quoted

confirms that these psalms find their fulfilment on the lips of, and in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus himself. The Psalms are the God-given words by which the Lord Jesus Christ leads his church in praying to and praising the Father.

A guided tour

Some museums offer an audio guide; this highlights and gives commentary on selected exhibits. You pause at each one for which information is provided, to have a close look and a careful listen, before moving on to the next. In the same way, we shall not look at every psalm but consider 32 psalms. We shall take these in 16 related pairs. I have chosen some well-known psalms, but also some others to illustrate the large number of less-known psalms; for it is our task to learn to pray them too. Some of my choices are arbitrary (even personal); but I have tried to include a representative sample of types of psalm from each of the five books.

It will be frustrating to walk quickly past so many psalms; and yet my prayer is that by the end of our tour you will feel better equipped to explore those we passed by; and that you will deeply desire to make all the psalms your prayers, again and again and again, for the rest of your life, and to lead others to do so.

Here are three things to bear in mind as we pause at each psalm.

1. *We will ask who is speaking.* There are different voices in the Psalms. Sometimes we hear a voice of authority speaking “down” to us from God on high. At other times we hear a human being speaking “upwards” to God on high, speaking by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Christ. And then again we sometimes hear the people of God speaking together, in prayer or praise, or to one another.

Always we will ask what it would have meant for the original psalmist to have spoken the psalm. Whether it was King David,

some other named psalmist or an anonymous believer, we need to ask what the psalm originally meant for them.

2. *We will ask what the psalm meant in **old-covenant** times.* The Psalms have been carefully arranged in five books. We cannot always tell exactly why they are in the precise order in which we find them. But it is often significant in which book a psalm is placed. I shall comment briefly on this as we embark on each book in our walking tour. That will help us as we ask what it would have meant for an old-covenant believer (such as **Simeon** or **Anna** in Luke 2:25-38) to have said or sung this psalm before Christ came.
3. *We will ask what it meant for Jesus and now means for us in Christ.* What would it have meant for Jesus of Nazareth to have sung a psalm during his earthly life? This is arguably the most significant question of them all; again and again it opens up the meaning and force of a psalm. In his full humanity, and as the forerunner of our faith, what did it mean for him, as the perfect believer, to pray this psalm?

This will help us as we move on to consider what difference it now makes that we sing a psalm after Christ. How does the old covenant language of the psalm translate into **new-covenant** fulfilment? How does the whole Bible help us see what the old-covenant **types and shadows** mean? I will try to help us get a feel for this.

All this will help us to grasp what it now means for us, either individually or together, to sing a psalm as men and women in Christ.

Joining Christ's choir

Imagine you are seated in a great concert hall. In the middle of the stage is Jesus Christ, the conductor and song-leader of the people of God. Behind him stands a huge choir: his church in every age. This choir sings the Psalms as the songs of Jesus, led by Jesus, shaped by Jesus, guided and taught by Jesus.

What do you need to do to join in? You need to understand the words of the psalms. You need to get hold of the “tune” of the psalms, by which I mean the emotions and affections they convey. You need to grasp what commitment will be required of you if you are to join the choir of Jesus and join in, for every psalm asks of us some commitment. Finally, you need to get up out of your seat in the audience and join the choir! That is the aim of this guide—to help us to do that.

Note:

I have written more fully about the Psalms in my two-volume book *Teaching Psalms* (Christian Focus: Volume 1, 2017; Volume 2, 2018). Volume 1 is a handbook about how to sing the Psalms in Christ, addressing the main difficulties and with chapters on the big themes of **biblical theology**. Volume 2 includes a short Christian introduction to each psalm and a chapter on the overall shape of the five books of the Psalter. These volumes would make a useful companion to this book. Material taken or adapted from these volumes is used by permission. Other resources are listed in the bibliography.

I. AT THE ENTRANCE GATE

Chapters 1 to 4 feature eight examples from Book I of the Psalms (Psalms 1 – 41). Apart from Psalms 1 and 2, almost all these psalms are headed “of David”. Together with Book II (Psalms 42 – 72), this forms the main “of David” collection of psalms. There is a tremendous focus on God’s anointed king—at first David, then David’s successors, and finally “great David’s greater Son”: the Lord Jesus Christ. The word “anointed one” is “Messiah” in Hebrew and then “Christ” in Greek. David and his successors were, in a manner of speaking, little “messiahs”; they show us something of the character and destiny of the final Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalms 1 and 2 are like two grand pillars, one on each side of the entrance gate into the books of Psalms. They introduce Book I and also head up the whole Psalter. The early **church father** Jerome (AD 342-420) described Psalm 1 as “the preface to the Psalms, as inspired by the Holy Spirit” and compared it to the great door of the building that is the Psalter (see Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, page 118). But it is really Psalms 1 and 2 together that fulfil this introductory function. Unlike almost every other psalm in Book I, they have no heading; almost all the others have “of David” at the top. These two psalms are bracketed by blessing and conclude with warnings. Psalm 1 begins with a declaration of blessing (**1:1***, “Blessed is...”), and Psalm 2 ends with a blessing (2:12, “Blessed are...”). Each warns, near the end, of a “way” that

* All Psalms verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

“leads to destruction” (1:6; 2:12). Together they set the scene and put down critical markers for our whole tour.

Psalm 1 is simple, problematical and, on the face of it, patently untrue. It declares a blessing (1:1-3), warns of destruction (v 4-5) and concludes by restating both of these (the blessing, v 6a, and the destruction, v 6b), so that we are in no doubt about the double-edged thrust of the psalm.

The blessed one

To say “Blessed is the one who...” (v 1) is confidently to affirm that the one to be described is under the favour of God: ultimately happy, the recipient of life, joy, peace, and delight. It is to declare that this person will be blessed and that blessing needs to be sought, and can be found, in no other place. This is an extraordinarily profound declaration. It calls for a decision of the will and heart. “Yes,” I say. “I really believe that this person, and only the person who is described here, will be blessed by God.” Even to join in with the first few words of this first psalm is a demanding challenge!

The blessed one is described first in terms of what they do not do. This comes in three stages, building in a crescendo.

First, this is “the one who does not walk in step with the wicked”. We meet “the wicked” often in the Psalms and in other books in the **wisdom literature**, especially Proverbs. These are men and women who have sold themselves to do evil; the whole direction of their life is against God. They march with this rebellious step; and we naturally want to walk in step with them, for we hate to be seen to be different. From the school playground to the senior care home, we instinctively want to say the same things as the wicked, to laugh at the same jokes as the wicked, to share the values of the wicked, to take the same life decisions as the wicked. Whatever your age, stage of life, ethnicity or culture, this will be an insidious temptation for you. It will never be easy to march out of step with an insistent world. And yet blessing

comes to the one who emphatically does not march to the beat of the world's drum.

Second, this is “the one who does not ... stand in the way that sinners take”. The word “stand” suggests something more settled perhaps than “walking”. Every life is a “walk” along a “way”: a way shaped by choices—large choices (whom to marry, where to live, what jobs to do) and smaller choices. Sinners—those whose hearts are not right with God—walk a particular “way”. They might not hurry along this way. They may “stand” as a symbol of allegiance, much as we might ask of someone, “Where do you stand on this issue?” These people have a “stance”, a position, a settled determination. Many of us are by nature weak; we echo the proverbial media mogul who is supposed to have said, “These are my principles. But, if you don't like them, I have other ones.” We have flexible “principles” that can be adjusted to fit in with the stance of those around us. And yet blessing comes to the one who deliberately and intentionally does not “stand” with them.

Third, here is “the one who does not ... sit in the company of mockers”. This is both more settled and more **adversarial**. It is more settled because they have not only “walked” and then “stood” but now they “sit”. To “sit” in the ancient world was the posture of legal deliberation; a judge would “sit” in judgment, as they do today. And it was the posture of authoritative teaching; you sat to teach, as Jesus did for the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1) and in the synagogue (Luke 4:20). So here is a settled position in which these people not only take their own decisions but claim an authority in the position they have taken. That position is emphatically adversarial; for not only do they themselves decide against God's way but they are “mockers” who jeer and sneer at the one who walks God's way. We experience this all the time from the **morally liberal** and **theologically pluralist** elite in our society. They mock us. And, as the eighteenth-century Christian William Paley lamented, “Who can resist a sneer?”

To be “the one who does not” do these things—who does not walk with these people or stand with these people—is very hard; for it

results in being the object of the mockery of these people. This person may be blessed, but their blessing comes at a cost.

So, if this is what the blessed one does not do, what positively defines this person? Psalm **1:2** tells us. Their “delight is in the law of the LORD”. In the deepest depths of their heart they love the LORD (the God of the covenant), and therefore they love his “law”. The word “law” (Hebrew *Torah*) means instruction or teaching. Probably here it refers especially to the whole of the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) and the preaching of the prophets as they proclaimed this covenant instruction. This person delights in this God-given scriptural instruction. And therefore they meditate “on [God’s] law day and night”. The word “meditates” in the original Hebrew means more than silent thought; it conveys the idea of vocal and declarative speaking of God’s teaching, and also the conviction that what is spoken audibly expresses the innermost convictions of the heart. Here is a person who not only “talks the talk”, saying what we might expect a **pious** person to say, but does so out of the deepest desire and delight of the heart. That is to say, this person genuinely believes that blessing comes from loving God and walking his way; this person both speaks and believes the declaration “Blessed is...”

In **verse 3**, we are given a beautiful picture of blessedness. In a hot climate, the only vegetation that always bears fruit is a tree with roots deep in life-giving water. Here is someone whose roots go deeply into God, the source of life; and so their “fruit” does not fail. In their life you see the fruit of their roots. They “prosper” in every way. (When we read the whole Bible, we find that “prosperity” is more deeply defined than we might think. Counterintuitively, it includes suffering, but it issues in eventual glory because it shapes a person in godliness.) They evidence love, joy, patience, kindness, unfailing faithfulness, peace and so on. And they do so consistently.

Verses 1-3 paint a beautiful picture of the blessed one. And yet their prosperity is hard-won, for this person will necessarily be the

object of cruel mockery from those who resent their refusal to walk with them in wickedness.

Blessing comes with warning

Verses 4-5 warn that there is no other path of blessing. There is a judgment coming. There is an “assembly”, which means a church or a congregation, to which “the righteous” (those who conform to the description of **v 1-3**) belong. Those who “stand” today “in the way that sinners take” now “will not stand in the judgment”. They may seem substantial, even weighty and significant; but on that day they will be seen to be insubstantial, blown away like “chaff” at harvest time. This is hard to believe, as we look at the confident assurance of those who care nothing for God’s law; and yet it is true. As the sixteenth-century **Reformer** John Calvin wrote:

“The profane despisers of God, although for a time they may reckon themselves happy, shall at length have a most miserable end.” (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Volume 1, page 1)

Verse 6 gives the deep reason why both the blessing and the warning are true. “The LORD”, the covenant God, is the reason. He “watches over” (in loving **providential** wisdom and care) “the way of the righteous”. Here is a “way” that goes in the opposite direction from “the way that sinners take” (**v 1**); it is a narrow way that leads to life (see Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:14), and God watches over those on that way. But there is another way: “the way of the wicked leads to destruction” in the coming judgment.

How do we read this psalm today?

So here is a psalm that sets before us a simple contrast, spelled out in vivid picture language in terms of its heart motivations, its evidence in life, and its two destinies. But it is also deeply problematical—because, while you and I want to be counted among the blessed, we know that by nature we are those who are wicked through and through. We

walk in step with the wicked, conforming to the pattern of this world. We stand in the way of sinners. Indeed, we so want to be affirmed in the way we have chosen that we mock anyone who goes another way; for mockery makes us feel better about our own life choices. We do not really believe that blessing comes in the way described here, and in no other way. And therefore destruction is our destiny. This is not a comfortable psalm.

Further, as we said earlier, on the face of it this psalm is patently untrue. As other psalms acknowledge, the wicked often prosper (see Psalm 73; also Job 21). One of the great tensions that runs through the Psalter is the one between the affirmation of Psalm 1 and the evidence of history which appears flatly to contradict it. How do we make sense of this tension?

The Bible teaches that there is one man, and one man only, who truly fits the description of Psalm 1 and deserves to inherit this blessing. When Jesus of Nazareth sang, “Blessed is the one who...” he believed it with every fibre of his being. He believed it, and he lived it and sought blessing in no other place. Surrounded by pressures to walk in step with the wicked, to stand in the way of sinners, to sit in the seat of mockers, he resolutely set his face against their values, their sneering, their actions. He was mocked most sharply and felt the pain of this mockery with an intensity we can scarcely comprehend. And yet he delighted in his Father’s instruction and declared it day and night with unflinching determination and the heart’s delight. He is the fruitful one. The **covenant** God, his Father, watched over his way. And therefore Jesus is the man upon whom the blessing of God the Father rests—the one with whom God the Father was and is well pleased (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). Bruce Waltke and James Houston are correct when they say, “Jesus Christ uniquely corresponds to the portrait of the righteous man” (*The Psalms as Christian Worship*, page 143).

To grasp that Jesus is the fulfilment of Psalm 1 preserves us from the tyranny of **moralism**. When moralism is in charge, we end up either complacently self-righteous (if we think we have succeeded) or

zealously, and sooner or later hypocritically, intent on outward conformity (for outward conformity is all we can hope to achieve), or despairingly hopeless (as we realise we continually fail). Without Jesus, Psalm 1 stirs us simply to try harder to be good. Only when we see Jesus as the blessed man of Psalm 1 is there hope. For in him, and in him alone, every blessing is to be found.

Our response as we sing Psalm 1 in Christ will therefore be a fragrant gospel blend of at least two tunes. First and foremost, we rejoice that Jesus Christ is the blessed one of Psalm 1, and that all the blessing of God rests upon him, and upon us as we are in him. Sometimes we feel that a Scripture has not been properly **applied** until there is some measurable change in our outward behaviour. And yet it is not wasted time to pause and meditate on the wonder of the wholehearted commitment of Jesus of Nazareth to the belief that blessing is truly found only in a delighted obedience to the law of his Father. His righteousness is **imputed** to us by **grace** through **faith**. By his righteousness we are freed from condemnation.

But then, stirred by his Spirit within us, we resolve—under grace and with joy—that we too will evidence more and more the marks of this blessed person. Our resolve to turn from the pressures of a sinful world will be strengthened; our delight in the law of God will be enriched and deepened; our confidence in final blessing and fruitfulness will be emboldened. When deeply troubled by the pressures of a world that insists we conform, the Spirit of Jesus within us will use our praying of this psalm to stiffen our determination to be different. When struggling with a cold **legalism**, the Spirit of Jesus will use this psalm to rekindle a delighted love of God's law in our hearts. When anxious and tempted to “two-time”

When struggling with cold legalism, the Spirit will use this psalm to rekindle a delighted love of God's law.

God—professing to be Christian while hedging our bets and still worshipping the world's gods—this psalm will deepen our confidence that the way of Jesus, the Psalm 1 way, is indeed the only good and blessed way to live.

Questions for reflection

- 1.** In what ways are you walking, standing or sitting in the way of sin?
- 2.** How could you use God's word to help you turn away from those ways?
- 3.** How would you sum up from this psalm what it means to be blessed?