

# The Psalms in the Christian life

## Andrew Shead

Thanks for coming! We've got less than the length of a movie together, so I'd like to cover quite a lot of ground. I'm planning to have three segments divided by three very brief activities, focused on reading, writing and speaking.

I'm also going to chat briefly with Fiona Pfennigwerth, who's very kindly brought some of her paintings along. Do feel free to ask questions of clarification if I'm not making any sense. But please save more general questions and discussions for supper afterwards.

So without further ado, let's open up the Book of Psalms and have a look.

## 1. Psalm 1, poetry and the purpose of the book

### *Paths*

Psalm 3 and most psalms after that are addressed to God: they are outpourings of sorrow, joy and trust. But Psalms 1 and 2 are a bit different: they are addressed directly to the reader, like a preface to the book. Psalm 1 is the words of a wise teacher to anyone searching for happiness—"Happy is the one" or "Blessed is the one": the word means both things—"who does not stand in the sinner's pathway, but who walks down God's path". The two pathways are contrasted in verse 6: the path of the righteous, or the way of the righteous, which God guards, and the path of the wicked, which leads to destruction.

But in verse 2, the image of the path is replaced by what it describes—that is, the Law of the Lord. The path is one of the key images of the Book of Psalms: it's got a special role in describing the law or instruction. (The Hebrew word is "*torah*": it can mean either "law" or generally "instruction" from God.) So the longest Psalm in the Bible—Psalm 119, the great *torah* or law psalm—begins, "Blessed are those whose path is blameless, who walk according to the *torah*"—the law, the instruction of the Lord. And it uses the image of this path some 20 times in that psalm.

Why am I going on about a path? Because in Psalm 1:2, delighting in God's *torah*—his instruction—is not just about lawkeeping. The path image suggests a whole lot of things. It suggests lifestyle. It suggests direction. It suggests safety. It suggests destination and purpose. It suggests knowledge, and, of course, it suggests a journey.

So why do we begin the Book of Psalms with a celebration of something that seems so un-psalm-like—that is, law, which would be more at home, perhaps, in Leviticus or Deuteronomy? Well, two reasons: firstly, if Israel ever found blessing and happiness, surely it was because their trust in God took the shape of obeying the law faithfully. Look at how the dynamics of this work out in a cry for help: listen to this one from Psalm 5:

Lead me, LORD, in your righteousness

because of my enemies—

make your way straight before me ...

Declare them guilty, O God!

Let their intrigues be their downfall.

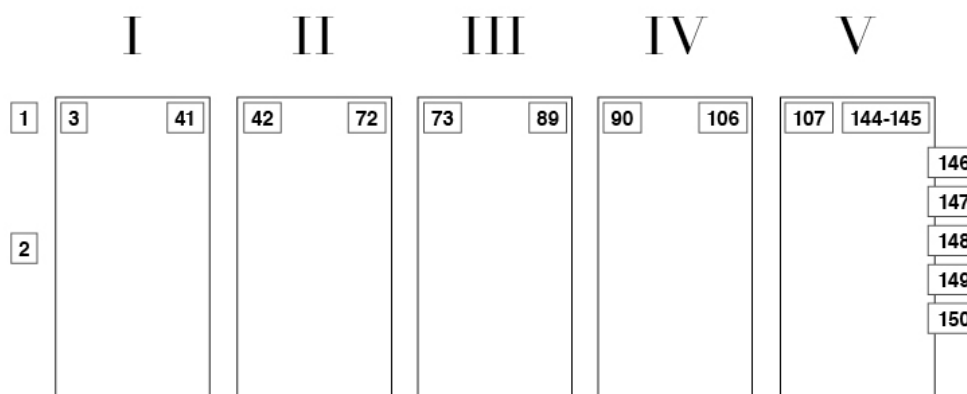
Banish them for their many sins,

for they have rebelled against you.  
 But let all who take refuge in you be glad;  
 let them ever sing for joy.  
 Spread your protection over them,  
 that those who love your name may rejoice in you.

(Psalm 5: 8, 10-11 NIV)

There's a path to happiness, and it involves the law.

The second reason, however, is that the wise teacher of Psalm 1 is actually presenting the Book of Psalms itself as God's *torah*—not in the sense of Mosaic law, but in the broader sense of instruction for living. All these prayers and songs that feel so raw and human have been received by God from their speakers, and were then given back again to us as his divine word—his perfect instruction for living. And so the editors of the Book of Psalms organised the 150 psalms into five books in an echo of the five books of the law—the books of Moses. They've done this by putting a little outburst of praise or doxology at the end of each book. So we have Psalm 3-41, Psalm 42-72, Psalm 73-89, Psalm 90-106, Psalm 107-145, and then 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, and then, at the beginning, Psalms 1 and 2:



These are the five books of the Psalter. Each book ends with a little burst of praise at the end of each Psalm, for example, the end of Psalm 41:

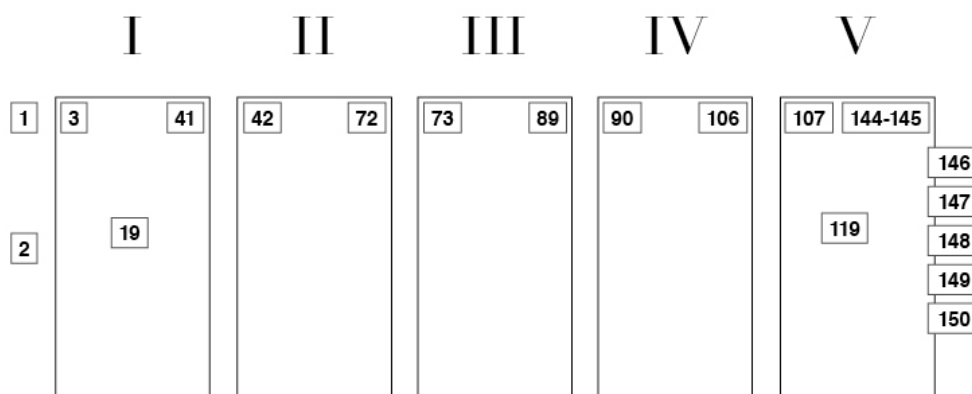
Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,  
 from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen and Amen.

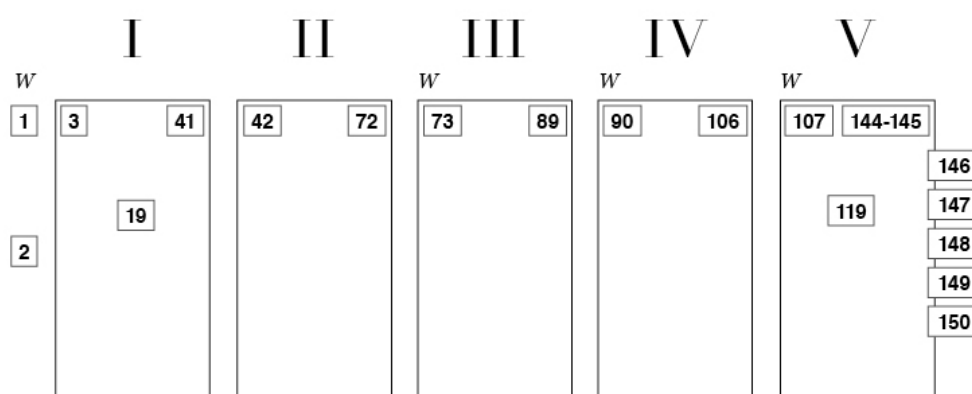
(Psalm 41:13)

End of Book 1.

At the end of the whole book of Psalms, we have these five psalms of praise (note the number five again!)—each one beginning and ending with the word “hallelujah”, meaning “praise the Lord”. We have this fivefold act of praise at the end of these five books of poetic *torah* or instruction. And at the centre of Books 1 and 5 are two *torah* psalms—two psalms that are all about the law and the instruction: Psalm 19 and Psalm 119:



They're there just to remind us of the nature of what we're reading. Finally, at the beginning of each new book, we get another psalm like Psalm 1 by a wise teacher—a wisdom psalm: Psalm 73 (which is an instructional psalm about the problem of goodness and evil), Psalm 90 (Moses' prayer for a heart of wisdom) and Psalm 107 (a series of case studies of affliction and salvation that are given for the wise person to study). There's no wisdom psalm at the beginning of Book 2 because, as we'll see, books 1 and 2 are bound together as a double.



Back to Psalm 1:2. What do wise people do with God's *torah*—with the psalms? It says that they meditate on them day and night—slowly, systematically absorbing them by rehearsing them and practising them. Remember the image of the path? Our relationship with the psalms should be dynamic—a journey that, as we walk, is going to root us deeply in God's living waters.

## Poetry

The right place to begin this journey is with the recognition that the Psalms are poetry—and for a good reason. Poetry is designed to do many things, but let me mention two of them: first of all, poetry slows us down. You can't skim poetry; it's about reading and

rereading. That's important because, secondly, poetry brings sounds and images into conversation with the words, and makes the words say more than they can say by themselves.

We could spend a whole evening on the mechanics of Old Testament poetry. I just want to make two points that I hope will enrich your reading of the Psalms. Firstly, the logic of Old Testament poetry is the side-by-side logic of juxtaposition—putting things next to each other. We know how narrative works: you have a long, progressively unfolding storyline, with each event following on in a sequence from the one before. We know how epistles work: you have statements, which often sound like a lawyer speaking, balanced with connecting words (“therefore”, “since”, “because”, “nevertheless”) and complex constructions. The Psalms aren't like that: they simply put two lines next to one another, and the ideas in one line will resonate and bounce off the ideas of the other line. It's a bit like having one of those old stereoscopic projectors with a slightly different image in each eye: you put them together and you see something 3D.

What that means is that the first task of reading the Psalms as poems is to try and work out how the lines clump together: it's nearly always going to be in groups of two or three. Then think, “How do those clumps combine together to tell a story or take us on a journey with the poet?” Most English versions help us out with this with indented lines and breaks between lines to herd them into larger groupings. These show us the main structural elements of the poem. See, for example, Psalm 1 (NIV):

### *Psalm 1*

- <sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
    who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
    or sit in the company of mockers,
- <sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and who meditates on his law day and night.
- <sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
    which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
    whatever they do prospers.
- <sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
    They are like chaff  
    that the wind blows away.
- <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
- <sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

The NIV divides the first verse 1 into two couplets. But three of the lines are very similar. You've got three body positions: walk, stand, sit. And then there are three companions: the wicked, the sinners and mockers.

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
 who does not walk in step with the wicked  
 or stand in the way that sinners take  
 or sit in the company of mockers,

These six words serve to map out the anatomy of a person's life. Imitating these behaviours, sharing the aspirations of God's enemies, identifying with those who despise people of faith—think of them as a stereoscopic image: you put all of these things together and they're supposed to pack a bit of an emotional punch.

The contrast in verse 2 comes in part from the shift from motion to stillness—from a crowd of people to a single human head and heart. And the emotion of delight gains an added depth as we see it expressing itself in the next line in a joyous obsession or lifestyle of ceaseless meditation.

<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
 and who meditates on his law day and night.

Furthermore, the object of this delight, which is God's law, is the counterpart to the path of sinners:

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
 who does not walk in step with the wicked  
 or stand in the way that sinners take  
 or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
 and who meditates on his law day and night.

<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
 which yields its fruit in season  
 and whose leaf does not wither—  
 whatever they do prospers.

<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
 They are like chaff  
 that the wind blows away.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
 nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
 but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Verse 6 contrasts those two different ways. Verse 3 gives us a fresh image of the same blessed person from verse 1:

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
 who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

or sit in the company of mockers,

<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.

<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.

<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
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<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Then we have a new image with three components: the tree, the fruit and the leaf. Each one gets its own elaboration:

<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.

We can say something about each of those images: from the still centre of reflection and trust in verse 2, it's like roots are boring down and branches are stretching out, and the image of the tree is cooled by water and sweetened with fruit. We get this intensely tangible sense of the fullness of life that flows from the person who sinks their being into God's words.

The last line of verse 3 is like a horizontal stroke that closes off that incredibly full and rich picture of the blessed person—the person who's not like that, but rather is like *this*! The evil companions who populated the edges of verse 1 take centre stage in verse 4. But they are summed up in just one single image, which is made even more insubstantial by being spread across two whole lines.

<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.

As opposed to a tree planted, they are chaff, blown away. I don't think it's an angry or passionate image; it's just dry, lifeless and a bit sad. All the excitement and passion the wicked believe they have found for themselves has vanished, just like dust in the wind.

Notice that if you move onto the next verse, this instructional psalm pulls out some serious logical words at the end. As the preacher points his sermon into the future, the “therefore” sums up the wicked and their destiny, and the “for” sums up the whole psalm.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over **the way of the righteous**,  
but **the way of the wicked** leads to destruction.

There’s an acknowledgement here that, at present, appearances may be deceptive: the way of the wicked might seem more attractive than the unexciting activity of meditation. But the psalmist is helping us see beneath the surface: by knowing ourselves truly—by knowing *others* truly—we can know our destinies. In addition, the thing about the two paths of verse 6 is that they are roads; they’re not just destinations. But you can tell where they’re going if you know how to read the signposts. And if your life reading skills are a bit wobbly, well, that’s what the Psalms are for: to teach you to read yourself and to read the world as God reads them.

### *The mechanics of reading and Activity 1: read Psalm 93*

I want to finish this short reflection on Psalm 1 by thinking about how I went about reading the psalm—the mechanics of reading, if you like. And I want you to have a go with Psalm 93 in your [handout](#).

Basically, I’ve been trying to pay attention to two different types of information—first of all, structure and the logical argument generated by that structure, and then, second of all, the pictorial stuff—the images. If you were drawing storyboards for a movie about a psalm, what would they look like? What would be the emotional texture of those images? These two things—structure and images—help me to answer the question, “What story does each type of information tell?” It’s not just, “What is the emotional impact of a particular image in verse 1, verse 2 or verse 3?”, but, “What emotional journey do those images take you on as you move from one image to the next?” The reason I think it’s helpful to do this is because otherwise, we tend to move straight to the logic of the argument, because we’re so used to reading Romans, and then we end up missing a whole dimension of the psalm’s meaning. Think of each image as being like a brushstroke in a painting, and each verse as being like a collection of brushstrokes that combine to create an image. Then the psalm as a whole is like a collage of images that tells a story.

So think about Psalm 93. Think particularly about the emotions column: think about the emotions of the psalm’s imagery and the logic of its structure. Try and plot the story that each one tells. What are your impressions of the image of each clump of lines? Jot these down. See if you can come up with a sense of the emotional journey the images are taking you on. Also, see if you can think of an image—one that’s maybe not necessarily related to the psalm at all, but an image that somehow captures the emotional journey of the psalm as a whole. Write that summarising image underneath the “Emotional journey” heading.

*Psalm 93 (NIV 2011)*

*Images*

*Argument*

<sup>1</sup> The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;  
the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength;  
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.

- <sup>2</sup> Your throne was established long ago;  
you are from all eternity.
- <sup>3</sup> The seas have lifted up, LORD,  
the seas have lifted up their voice;  
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.
- <sup>4</sup> Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,  
mightier than the breakers of the sea—  
the LORD on high is mighty.
- <sup>5</sup> Your statutes, LORD, stand firm;  
holiness adorns your house  
for endless days.

<i>Emotional journey</i>	<i>Rational journey</i>
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When I read Psalm 93, I was struck by that image of being clothed in “majesty”, which is something you can’t actually see, and the psalmist has turned it into “clothes”. What does majesty even look like? How does raw glory appear? I was also struck by the way in which, in verse 2, he moves from radiant energy to this sense of vast mass—huge stretches of time: it makes me feel a bit like I’m standing on top of a cliff, experiencing vertigo. Verse 3 is so interesting, because you have that hypnotic rhythm of the seas: with every repetition, it’s like the seas are rising higher and higher. And yet on top of all of that cosmic upheaval, we’re elevated by those repetitions until we get this climax, in verse 4, of the Lord’s name.

Psalm 93 seems to me to be a psalm about nobility. How can you draw nobility? How can you draw majesty? Then you get such a change in verses 3 and 4, where we come back down to earth into the temple, which is so mundane. But we’re not the same as we were before we went on this amazing journey, up into the heights. We’ve got a bit of God with us, which is like stable ground, and it makes the normal world feel different. And so, my sense of that emotional journey is the idea of a voyage into awe and the excitement of discovering little shards of that divine majesty in the mundane words and worship of our life together.

This is the image I came up with: “This psalm is like a small child in the park, thrown high into the air, who lands back in her father’s arms with leaves clutched in her fists.”

I haven’t thought about the argument of the psalm at all; I wanted to think about the emotional journey it takes you on. The next step would be to think about the argument and examine how it says more than it *could* have said because it’s poetry. So meditate on the psalms and on poetry.

## Interlude: Responding visually to the Psalms: An interview with Fiona Pfennigwerth

**AS:** At this point, I’m going to bring forward from the outline a little chat with Fiona. So if I could ask Fiona to come up. Fiona Pfennigwerth, everyone. Hello, Fiona!

**FP:** Hi.



**AS:** It's so lovely to have you. Fiona is an artist who's been painting the Bible for many years. I first saw your paintings of [the five scrolls](#). You've also done [John's Gospel](#). Unintentional advertisement: if you want books of them, talk to Fiona!

**FP:** Thank you!

**AS:** She's got absolutely beautiful books for incredibly low prices. So end of advertisement. Tell me, why the Psalms and what struck you as you read them?

**FP:** Well, I think the Psalms, because they're where faith collides with life. We can see ourselves as believers, but only think of that in academic terms. If you see yourself as someone who *trusts*, however, you embody that and it becomes about how you respond, how you act and how you live. The Psalms does this with all this rawness: the guys who wrote it were in such terrifying situations we can't even dream of, and they came at them able to say to God anything that was on their minds. They could rage at him and shout, "So where are you?" They let it all out.

**AS:** I've been talking about imagery; you're an image-maker. How does a psalm generate a painting for you?

**FP:** This is a huge question. I read them and read them and read them until they're just in my mind. And then I go walking in beautiful places. I see something and think, "That's Psalm 19." But it comes from having read them and sat with them. The psalm's images, as you've said, help to slow you down. So you read it, you think about it, and then you can just go out into the bush and find all these things there in answer.

**AS:** That's Psalm 19 over there, is that right?

**FP:** Yes, it is. It's two versions of it: "The heavens declare the glory of God", and then it ends up with "my Rock and my Redeemer". I wanted to get across something that showed that Psalm 19 is more about the sun than the sky. And so when I finished the painting on the left, I decided it was too threatening, so I started it again. I wanted to get that light and that joy in, and the reflection of the light of the sun in the rocks, because the rock has to be part of that.

**AS:** Let me turn that around for a final question: so how does the act of painting a psalm enrich your appreciation of the text?

**FP:** Oh, again, it slows you down. They've all got to slow you down to get you time to think about it. When I'm painting, I can't think of things like, "Do I need to go shopping?" I'm only thinking about the water and painting it, asking myself, "Is that wash working?" But subconsciously, I've got the text in front of me as well as physically on the studio desk. And as I'm working, I'm going over what that psalm says.

**AS:** Thank you very much. Fiona is around afterwards if you want to chat at supper. There are some other artwork up the back too. So so nice of you to bring your work in progress. Hurry up and finish them!

**FP:** Thank you very much!

## 2. Psalm 2, pottery and the plot of the book

### *Psalm 2*

Okay, next: Psalm 2! This is going to be a long night.

If Psalm 1 was about the purpose of the Book of Psalms, Psalm 2 is about the plot. It's a psalm about a war between earth and heaven, with four main characters. The first character is the enemies:

- <sup>1</sup> Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?
- <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- <sup>3</sup> “Let us break their chains  
and throw off their shackles.”

The enemies introduce their opponents: the Lord and his Anointed (characters 2 and 3). The Lord is the focus of verses 4-6, and when he speaks, he straight away introduces us to character number 3:

- <sup>4</sup> The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.
- <sup>5</sup> He rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
- <sup>6</sup> “I have installed my king  
on Zion, my holy mountain.”

God’s king is character number 3, and in verses 7-9, we hear him talking to us about his relationship with character number 2, the Lord:

- <sup>7</sup> I will proclaim the LORD’s decree:
- He said to me, “You are my son;  
today I have become your father.
- <sup>8</sup> Ask me,  
and I will make the nations your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth your possession.
- <sup>9</sup> You will break them with a rod of iron;  
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

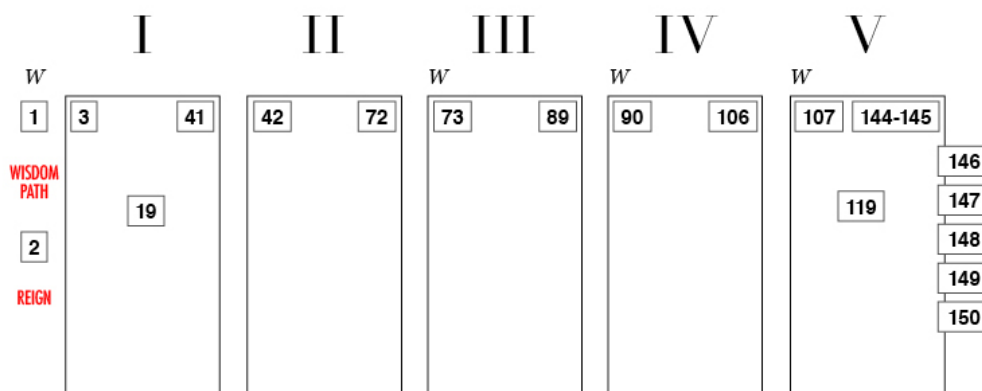
Then in verse 10, the narrator addresses the enemies with words of wisdom that remind us of Psalm 1: he tells them that what they need to do is avoid walking a path to destruction:

- <sup>10</sup> Therefore, you kings, be wise;  
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
- <sup>11</sup> Serve the LORD with fear  
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
- <sup>12</sup> Kiss his son, or he will be angry  
and your way will lead to your destruction,  
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.

In his last line, the psalmist introduces character number 4, who is the refuge-seeker: “Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” That very last line uses the word “blessed” or “happy”, which was the first word of Psalm 1. It links the two psalms together and it shows

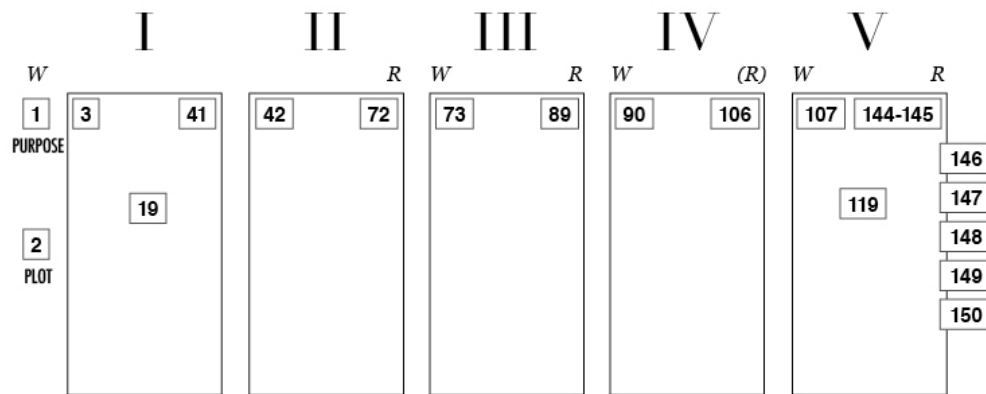
us that this refuge-seeker is none other than the wise reader who delights in God's instruction. Most of the psalms that follow are told from the perspective of this character as he addresses God in trust and thanksgiving, and comes to God for refuge.

So those are the characters. It's nice to have characters before you have plot. So what about the plot? Well, the plot of Psalm 2 is actually the plot of the whole book: the universal reign of the Lord and his messiah over all the nations.



## Plot

So we have a book whose purpose is to make us wise for living and whose plot centres around the universal reign of God and his messiah. One indication of the messiah's centrality to the book is the way that these messianic or royal psalms have been inserted at the end of each book. The first pair of books closes with a psalm by Solomon—Psalm 72—which prays that the messiah would rule again with righteousness and be a blessing to the world. It ends with an interesting line: “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse”, which marks Book 1 and 2 as an early (in Israel's history) small version of the Psalms. Book 3 closes with Psalm 89, which is about the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7. And Book 4, for reasons we'll come to, ends with a psalm that's not actually strictly royal, but it responds to Psalm 89 and calls for God to remember that royal covenant. Then close to the end of Book 5, we find Psalm 144, in which King David looks back over his life and remembers God's faithfulness to him.



There's a very clear arrangement to this book. But it does seem odd to talk about a book of poetry as if it had a plot. Of course, the Psalms are not a novel; they don't have the sort of plot you get in a narrative. In addition, they also show signs of having existed in many smaller collections before they were gathered into the one big collection of 150 poems—the Psalms of Ascents, the Psalms of Asaph, the Psalms of David and so on. And yet, even though through apparent randomness, lots of little collections have been brought together into a big collection, there is a movement in the Book of Psalms from beginning to end that, in God's providence, works like a plot.

Now we could have a whole week of evenings to going through the Psalms. I'll just touch on one or two elements of this movement.

### *Books 1-2*

Books 1 and 2 are dominated by individual psalms of King David—especially psalms of lament, as he cries out to God in his distress, and psalms of trust, as he comes to God to seek refuge from his enemies. These give us a very vivid portrait of the untriumphant king—a strong contrast to the universal kind of Psalm 2. It's somewhat of a challenge to the claims of Psalm 2. There are a few smaller groupings in Book 1 and 2 that pursue subthemes—like the place of Zion in God's plan, for example, and hymns and praise psalms. It's not all lament, but the more dominant portrait is a portrait of a lowly, suffering, untriumphant David, oppressed by enemies, oppressed by sin and oppressed by sickness. The historical David is very much in the foreground: there are lots of links back into the books of Samuel. But because of the promises made to David by Nathan in 2 Samuel 7, his life and times become a model of the suffering and vindicated Christ.

So that's where we begin—with the weakness of the king and the life and times of David.

Book 2 does move us a little bit along from Book 1, because we start to look at the future. So Psalms 45 and 72 move the focus forward to Solomon: Solomon in Psalm 72 is looking beyond the historical David, and the goal of universal blessing through the reign of the messiah is put forward hopefully:

<sup>17</sup> May his name endure forever;  
may it continue as long as the sun.

Then all nations will be blessed through him,

and they will call him blessed.

<sup>18</sup> Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel,  
who alone does marvelous deeds.

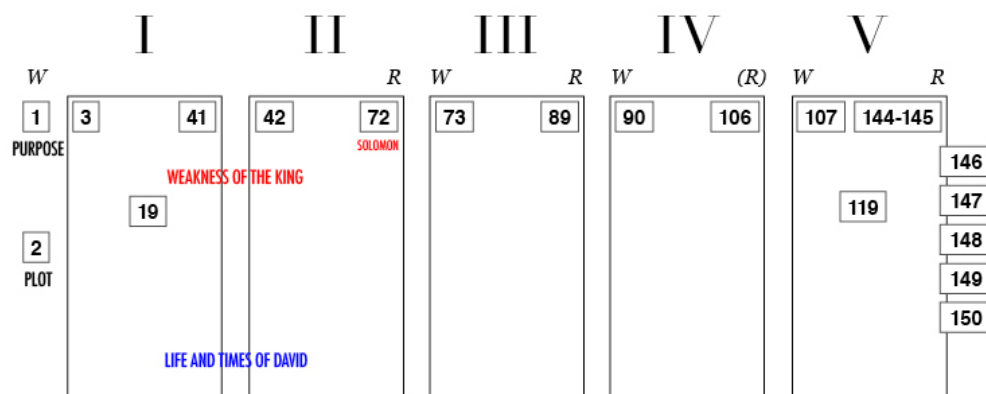
<sup>19</sup> Praise be to his glorious name forever;  
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.

Amen and Amen.

<sup>20</sup> This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.

(Psalm 72:-17-20, NIV 2011)

This is a very hopeful ending to a book that, overall, is pretty low, as the messiah—or, at least, King David— goes through a lot of struggles and difficulties.



### Book 3

Book 3: are we going to get better or worse? The answer is B: worse. This section really declines towards the lowest point in the whole book. It begins with Psalm 73, which questions the wisdom of Psalm 1; it ends with Psalm 89, which questions the messianic promise of Psalm 2. The background to the book is probably the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

The eventual fall and destruction of the nation very much prominent in this book. Most of the communal laments of the psalms—the ones spoken by the whole community together—are found in Book 3. And we repeatedly hear questions of a nation in crisis: “Why?”, “How long, O Lord?” and so on. There are still positive psalms—for example, Psalms 84-87, which celebrate all the institutions that were destroyed in the exile—the temple, the land, the king, the city. Psalm 86 is even a Psalm of David. So when it says, “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse”, it doesn’t mean there are no more psalms of David. Instead, I think it draws a line at the end of this section of the psalms whose background is the historical king David. Many of his psalms reappear, or appear for the first time later in the Book of Psalms. They’re perhaps oriented more towards later Davids—his descendants on the throne—or even to Davids of the future.

So there are some notes of hope in Book 3. But those notes of hope are completely outweighed by the disaster of Psalm 89, which is the crisis point of the whole book. It’s an

extended reflection, as I said before, on the eternal Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7. It remembers God’s mighty power—the power that protected David:

<sup>20</sup> I have found David my servant;  
with my sacred oil I have anointed him.

<sup>21</sup> My hand will sustain him;  
surely my arm will strengthen him.

(Psalm 89:20-21 NIV 2011)

God’s guarantee of an eternal covenant is repeated many times. Verse 35:

<sup>35</sup> Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—  
and I will not lie to David—

<sup>36</sup> that his line will continue forever  
and his throne endure before me like the sun ...

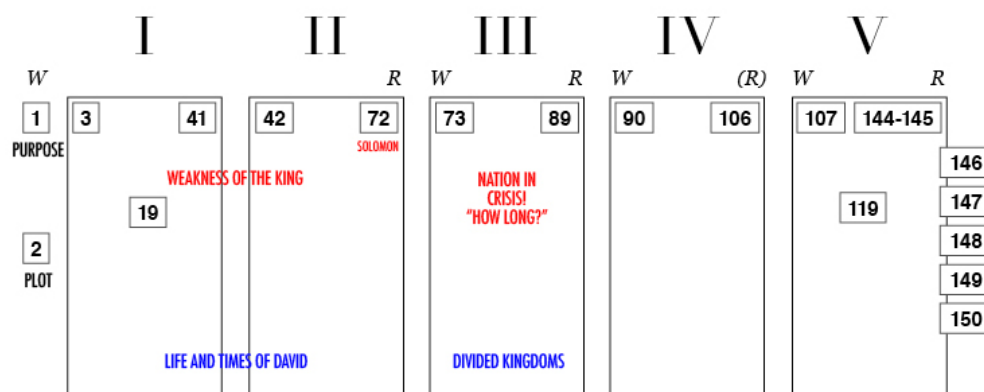
(Psalm 89:35-36 NIV 2011)

And yet verse 38 says,

<sup>38</sup> But you have rejected, you have spurned,  
you have been very angry with your anointed one.

<sup>39</sup> You have renounced the covenant with your servant  
and have defiled his crown in the dust.

What happened? The agonized final question of this psalm—“How long, O LORD?”—finds absolutely no answer. “How long will your wrath burn like fire?” No answer. Psalm 2 gave us this grand vision of the universal reign of God and his Davidic messiah over all the nations, and here we are at the midpoint of the book: the plan is in tatters; the first David and Israel have failed; the nation has rejected God’s law, his wise *torah*; and all this has delivered a body blow to their hopes.



#### Book 4

So what happens in Book 4? Well, Book 4 opens very unexpectedly with, perhaps, the oldest psalm in the book: a psalm of Moses. It begins, “Lord, you have been our dwelling

place throughout all generations”. In other words, God was still the God of Israel before he brought David to the throne, and perhaps—just perhaps—he will go on being Israel’s God even without a David on the throne. After all, before David, God had made a promise to Abraham. On the basis of that promise, he forgave Israel’s iniquity and sin, even when they made a golden calf as Moses was up the mountain (Exod 32). The final three psalms in Book 4 are long historical psalms that rehearse the history of Israel from the flood, Abraham and Moses. These psalms take us right up to the point of Moses’ intercession before God in the wake of the apostasy of the golden calf, and God announcing his eternal unchanging nature—compassionate, faithful, slow to punish, quick to forgive—one who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. If that’s what God is like, is it all right that his Davidic promise failed?

Well, in between these Mosaic brackets, we get a block of 10 psalms—Psalms 91-100. These psalms are perhaps the most extended celebration of jubilant praise of God in the whole Book of Psalms up until the very end. These are psalms of God’s universal reign, but they are unmediated by any messiah. There are new songs of praise in the face of God’s love, faithfulness and justice, and the key phrase that sums them up, repeated three or four times in this group, is, “The Lord reigns”; “The Lord has become king”. This is a mystery of God’s grace—that no unfaithfulness in his people—not even the failure of Israel’s Davidic line—can prevent him from being himself: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. That famous line from Exodus 34 is quoted in a number of places in this book of the Psalms.

But we are not done with David: in Psalm 101, David reenters the plot as a blameless and faithful king who roots out evil from the land. He casts himself on God in confident expectation of his victory in Psalm 102; he remembers what God told Moses about his eternal faithfulness in Psalm 103; and so, at the end, of Book 4, we see a people who are still suffering in exile, but by Psalm 106, they’re confident to pray for God to remember his covenant in view of his dealings with Moses.

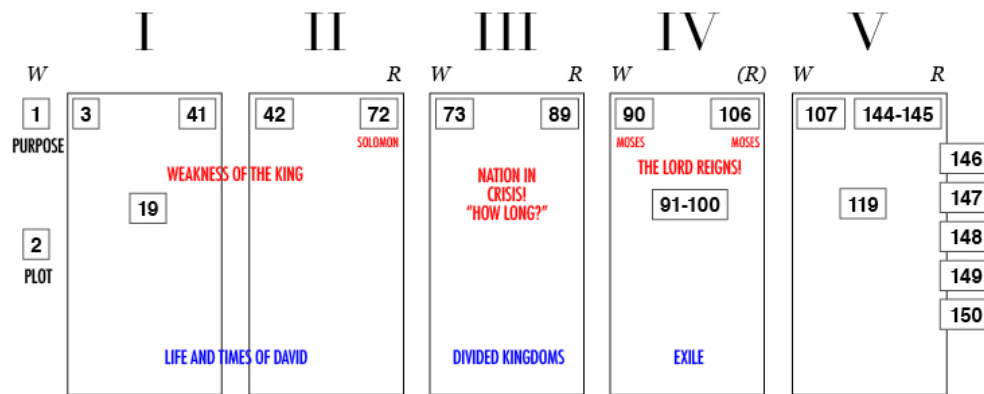
45 for their sake he remembered his covenant  
and out of his great love he relented.

46 He caused all who held them captive  
to show them mercy.

47 Save us, LORD our God,  
and gather us from the nations,  
that we may give thanks to your holy name  
and glory in your praise.

(Psalm 106:45-47 NIV 2011)

So the historical/conceptual background to this book is the exile. (Please note I’m not saying that this is the period in time when these psalms were written; I’m saying that this is the period of time that these psalms were gathered together.)



## Book 5

The very first psalm in Book 5 answers the prayer at the end of Book 4:

- <sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his love endures forever.
- <sup>2</sup> Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story—  
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
- <sup>3</sup> those he gathered from the lands,  
from east and west, from north and south.

(Psalm 107:1-3 NIV 2011)

There is the answer to Israel's prayer to be gathered back from the nations. So the background to the fifth book, I would say, is return: the historical setting feels like the return from exile, and David is there at the start, praising God among the nations in Psalm 108—praying that his glory would be over all the earth. And in Psalm 109, we see David praying that God would judge his enemies—the same enemies that we met in Psalm 2, but who now afflict the messiah. Then, in Psalm 110, we finally see the return of the exalted messiah of Psalm 2 in his full glory. Psalm 110 verse 1 was quoted by the New Testament authors more than any other single verse in the whole Bible:

- <sup>1</sup> The LORD says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet.”

The New Testament authors rightly recognised that God's final crushing of his enemies and his universal rule over the nations would be accomplished through David's greatest son—the risen and exalted Christ. The Davidic monarchy may have failed, but God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 did not fail.

So the beginning of Book 5 gives us a risen, exalted messiah. And from that triumphal vision of the future, Book 5 then turns to the present with that massive psalm, Psalm 119,

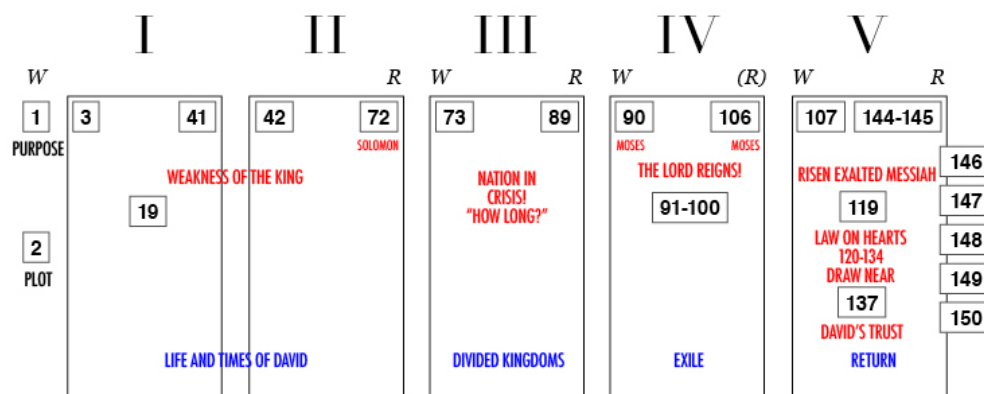


celebrating the law being written on the heart. It's followed by the Songs of Ascents in Psalms 120-134—the songs of the people as they draw near with confidence to the throne of God.

And yet the harsh realities of exile and loss are not forgotten. Do you remember Psalm 137?

- <sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.
- <sup>2</sup> There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,
- <sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

So from after 137, the last little block of psalms in this book focuses back on the life of David—his sufferings, his patient trust, his eventual rescue by God—before closing with a final five songs of praise.

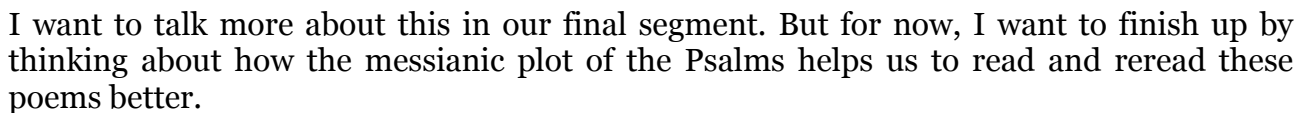


So here we are at the end. And by the way, well done! We finally got there.

### *The pattern of David's life*

But one question: what does it all add up to? The final block in Book 5 takes us back to the David of Psalm 3 to show us that we have just travelled the journey of David's life with him. It's a journey of suffering, failure and humiliation. It's also a journey of miraculous resurrection and new life through the power of God, the King of the universe. David's life was a pattern for the life, death and resurrection of David's greater son, and the new song that is sung in Psalms 90-100 is the new song that is going to be sung forever by the saints gathered around the throne of the Lamb in heaven. There's an overall shape to this book—a downward movement from lament back up again to praise. That shape is a really important shape for understanding and reading the psalms well. It's the exact same shape of Paul's great hymn to the Christ in Philippians 2:

- <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;



Andrew Shead, "The Psalms in the Christian Life", [ccl.moore.edu.au](http://ccl.moore.edu.au)

- 5 They encourage each other in evil plans,  
they talk about hiding their snares;  
they say, “Who will see it?”
- 6 They plot injustice and say,  
“We have devised a perfect plan!”  
Surely the human mind and heart are cunning.
- 7 But God will shoot them with his arrows;  
they will suddenly be struck down.
- 8 He will turn their own tongues against them  
and bring them to ruin;  
all who see them will shake their heads in scorn.
- 9 All people will fear;  
they will proclaim the works of God  
and ponder what he has done.
- 10 The righteous will rejoice in the LORD  
and take refuge in him;  
all the upright in heart will glory in him!

I’ve printed out Psalm 64 for you with three column headings. Because of time, I’m not going to get you to actually do this activity. But let me just talk about it and encourage you to take it home and do it with this or a different psalm.

The first column reminds us that the psalm had a location in the life of David and of Israel. The second column points to the fact that Jesus both prayed these psalms himself and also fulfilled them. And the third column invites us to place our own life experiences into this psalm—not directly, but as the people of Christ, confident that God’s protection of his messiah transfers across. As David voiced his complaint—“Hear me, my God, as I voice my complaint”—there is an invitation to the people to join in.

I’ve called this a writing exercise because I think it can be helpful sometimes to rewrite a psalm, drawing on our own experiences, as a way of meditating on its meaning for us. What would this psalm have meant to David? Think of Absalom’s propaganda campaign against his father, the violence of those words in verse 3:

- 3 They sharpen their tongues like swords  
and aim cruel words like deadly arrows.

But then in verse 7,

- 7 But God will shoot them with his arrows;  
they will suddenly be struck down.

This is exactly the story of David and Absalom, and I think of that story when I read this psalm. And yet, notice how verses 9 and 10 move from David’s individual experience to the experience of all the people: he put this poem into the nation’s hymnbook so that they could relive it with him—be drawn to see how God was at work in that incident in new ways and be encouraged to join David in in refuge-seeking:

<sup>9</sup> All people will fear;  
 they will proclaim the works of God  
 and ponder what he has done.

<sup>10</sup> The righteous will rejoice in the LORD  
 and take refuge in him;  
 all the upright in heart will glory in him!

So as you think about how this psalm might be rewritten from your own experience, remember that this is what it wants you to do: travel the same journey that David and, of course, the Lord Jesus travelled before you. See God through their eyes and respond with those same activities of verse 9—the same fearing, proclaiming, pondering and rejoicing.

I think of the way that Jesus must have prayed in the night watches while the Pharisees were conspiring, preparing barbed questions to trip him up and condemn him. They had confidence that the perceived public good was going to blind people to their self-interest. How that must have wounded our Lord! And yet Jesus had the words to silence them. He had the arrows; where did he get them? He got them from the Father. The apostles, as they reflected on Jesus' life, did all those things in verse 9: they feared, they proclaimed, they pondered. What does it look like to live your own experience through that story? That's what I'd like to encourage you to think about doing.

### 3. Psalm 8, personhood and the practice of praise

#### *Psalm 8*

I want to start this final section, which is going to be briefer than the last one, by thinking about Psalm 8. This psalm is sandwiched between two identical lines:

<sup>1</sup> LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory  
 in the heavens.

<sup>2</sup> Through the praise of children and infants  
 you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
 to silence the foe and the avenger.

<sup>3</sup> When I consider your heavens,  
 the work of your fingers,  
 the moon and the stars,  
 which you have set in place,

<sup>4</sup> what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
 human beings that you care for them?

<sup>5</sup> You have made them a little lower than the angels  
 and crowned them with glory and honor.

- <sup>6</sup> You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
 you put everything under their feet:  
<sup>7</sup> all flocks and herds,  
 and the animals of the wild,  
<sup>8</sup> the birds in the sky,  
 and the fish in the sea,  
 all that swim the paths of the seas.

<sup>9</sup> LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

It's called an "envelope" for obvious reasons, and it tells us what the psalm is about. The verses in between that envelope explore the nature of this divine majesty.

Right in the centre of the psalm, one verse stands out:

<sup>4</sup> what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?

In Hebrew, its lines are very short: they actually rhyme, which means I know them off by heart (very rare for me! Rhymes are good for that). They open with the exact same word in Hebrew that we have in the envelope: the Hebrew word "*mah*" means either "what" or "how". Handy, isn't it! So the message is that, among all the wonders of the heavens, mankind is the ultimate testimony to God's majesty. It's because humans are the most impressive of God's creatures, right? No, absolutely not! The question of this verse is not a triumphal question; it is a wondering—almost unbelieving—question that something so small and weak could be raised to such heights. Just "a little lower than the angels", and ruling over all creation.

Now there's a clue to that humble reading of verse 4 in the previous section: God's glory in the heavens in verse 1 ("You have set your glory in the heavens") is contemplated in verse 3 ("When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers")—but only after a really odd interruption there in verse 2—to mention the lips of children:

<sup>2</sup> Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.

Sometimes I think the psalm would be better if that was missing—if the psalm just moved nicely from "set your glory in the heavens" to "consider your heavens". But the point of that interruption, I think, is to say that God uses the weak things of this world to bring down the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms. Furthermore, it is precisely God's use of weakness to defeat power that makes his name so supremely majestic and glorious.

## *Personhood*

Now think about context in the book: do you think (because I certainly do!) that there's a connection here to the messiah of Psalm 2 and the suffering David of Psalm 3? Do you think, maybe, that the exalted son of Psalm 2 is none other than the puny king of Psalm 3, who's been lifted up to reign supreme over the nations in the exact same way that weak human beings are crowned with glory and made to rule over God's creation? I think there

are a couple of clues to this connection back to Psalm 2 in Psalm 8 here. First of all, the royal words in verse 5:

<sup>5</sup> You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and **crowned** them with glory and honor.

The word “crowned” gives mankind a kingly status. Secondly (and this is a bit more subtle, but I really like it), the way in which humans and God act together is beautifully conveyed by the division of a single body between two people:

<sup>6</sup> You made them **rulers** over the works of **your hands**;  
you put everything under **their feet**:

Do you see the image? God’s hands; human feet. You don’t want to think about it too closely, but it’s like a blended image. That takes me back to the language of dominion in Psalm 2: it says,

<sup>8</sup> Ask me,  
and I will make the nations your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth your possession.

<sup>9</sup> You will break them with a rod of iron;  
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

“I will make”; “you will break”: the same relationship as “your hands”; “their feet”.

But let’s not get too carried away here, because just having allusions to the messiah doesn’t mean there is no difference between Psalm 2 and Psalm 8. This royal ruler in Psalm 8, who exercises God’s power in weakness, is *not* the Davidic king; he’s Adam. We know he’s Adam because of the use of creation language from Genesis 1:

<sup>7</sup> all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,  
<sup>8</sup> the birds in the sky,  
and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.

That whole section there is taking us right back to the beginning of the Bible and showing us the mandate of Adam. I’m saying “Adam” rather than “humankind” because that picture of his dominion is a picture of complete and perfect rule, and it is just as idealistic and future-oriented as the picture of the messiah’s rule is in Psalm 2. This is who we were made to be.

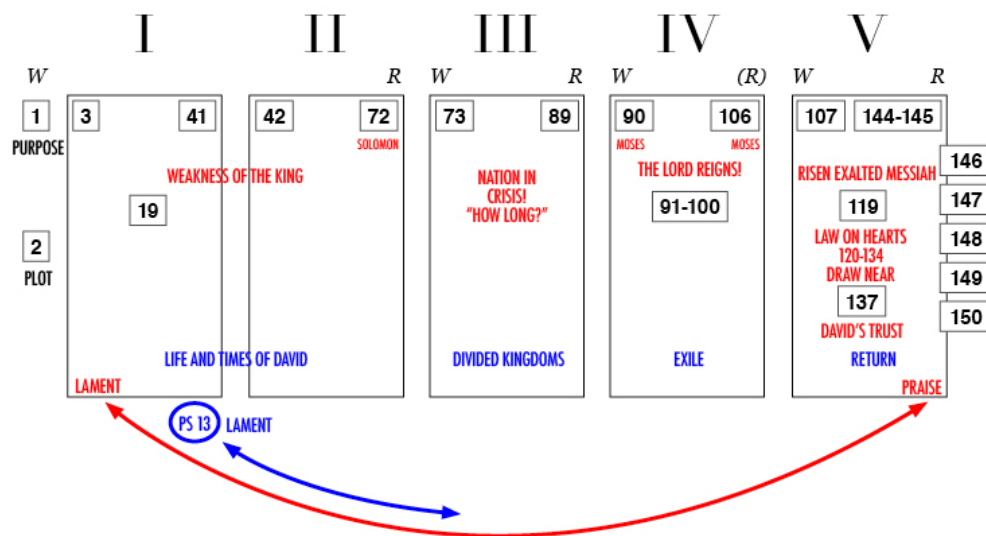
But to this point, only Jesus, the second Adam, has ever been this person—has ever been this human. Bringing Psalm 2 and Psalm 8 together, Jesus is God’s eternal Son and king, who descended from glory, took on weak, mortal, human flesh, and, in the words of Hebrew 5:7, “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death”. (That’s one of my favourite lines about Jesus.) This descent into human weakness, humility and suffering is what reveals, more than anything else, both the fullness of God’s divine majesty *and* the essence of true humanity.

### *The path of praise*

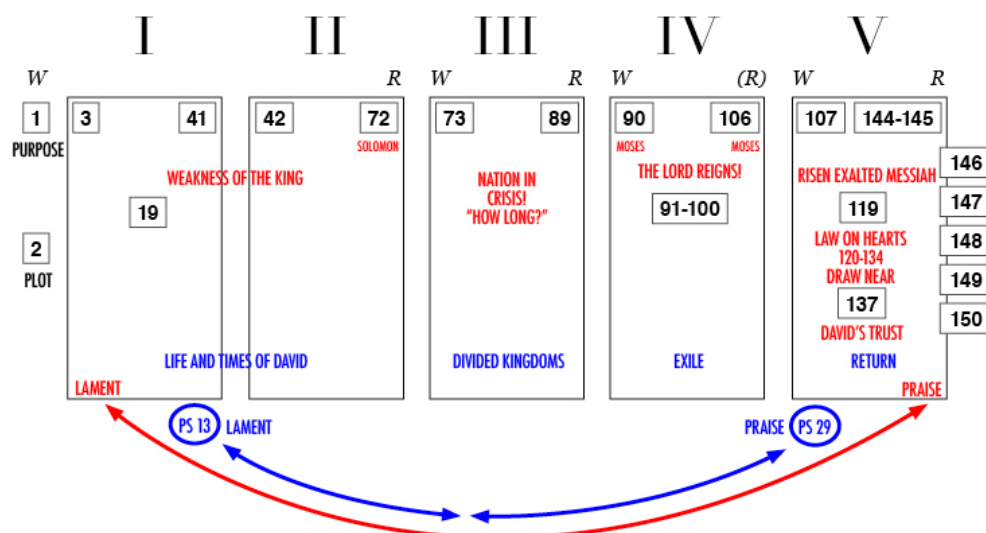
I think two things follow from this in terms of the way we use the psalms. Number 1: the path that the wise person of Psalm 1 must walk down is the path Jesus walked. It’s the path

of humble trust, suffering and death, and vindication and glory. It's this path of our diagram. It's a path of praise, actually: Jesus is our template for praise as his suffering was an act of praise, because it was endured in trust. His complaints were an act of praise, because they acknowledged the presence and power of God, even in the times when he was absent.

Here's a reading tip for you: it's not just the Book of Psalms as a whole that has this shape of down and up—lament and praise; it is almost every individual psalm as well. Nearly every psalm sits somewhere on that same curve. So in psalms of lament, the psalmist is on the downslope—in the pit of despair—but still, nearly all (with about one or two exceptions) the psalms of lament look both backwards in faith and forwards in hope to the faithfulness of God. Here's a lament psalm—for example, Psalm 13: it starts about here and it goes all the way to about here, and then it stops.

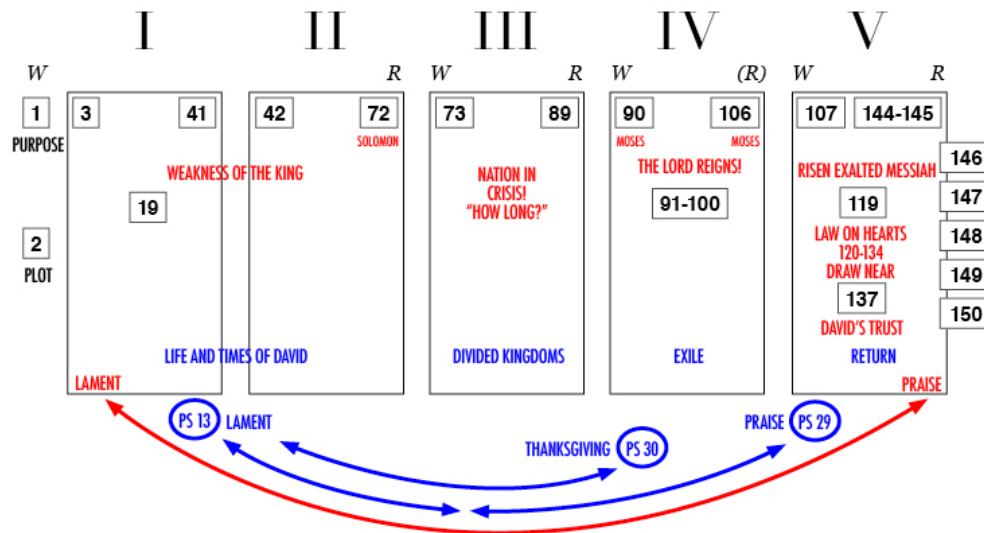


Psalms of praise (e.g. Psalm 29), on the other hand, live on the upslopes of this journey: sometimes the psalmist is so lost in contemplation of God's goodness, all memory of pain for the moment is set aside.





Even more than psalms of pure lament, and certainly more common than psalms of pure praise, are psalms that we could best label as “thanksgiving”, where the psalmist is sitting about here.



But even though he is sitting on the upslope, he is still very conscious of the downslope he's just endured; the memory of the horrors from which he was saved is still so vivid, it colours his gratitude. Psalm 30 is a good example of this.

The Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms is “*Tehillim*”. It's a Hebrew word that means “praises”. That can seem wrong when we realise how many psalms are actually laments and how few psalms do what Psalm 29 does and just simply praise God. But I think our problem is that we're letting our idea of praise shape our approach to the psalms. Shouldn't it be the other way around? If they're called “praises”, let them teach us what praise really is. The psalms teach us as a whole the way they collectively explore the messiah's journey what praise truly looks like.

### *To be human is to praise*

My second and final point is that praise is the most truly human thing we can do. In fact, I think the Psalms suggest to us that to praise is to be human, and to be human is to praise. As David says in Psalm 6, “Among the dead no one proclaims your name” (v. 5). Who praises you from the grave? Or Psalm 115:17: “It is not the dead who praise the LORD”. Or, as we saw in Psalm 8:2, weak humans become instruments of the majesty of God when they praise him with their lips. That central fourth verse of Psalm 8 suggests, I think, not just that God remembers humans, but that being remembered by God is what makes *us* human. The parameters of our humanity are very simple: God creates, we marvel; God promises, we trust; God saves, we rejoice.

Out of that comes my final reading tip (although maybe it's a speaking tip): the praise that we give back to God, we give back to him as humans. That means that we don't give it back as disembodied angels or spirits; we give it back as deeply embodied persons. To be human is to be embodied. And as owners of bodies, those bodies shape everything we think and do, and vice versa. The way we think something is shaped by our bodies as well: back in Psalm 1, the word “meditate” in verse 2 means “to mutter” or “to speak aloud”. The wise way of delighting in God's law is to delight in body as well as in soul.

Why? Why should we use our bodies? Well, think about it: think about when we have unbelievers with us in church. We don't mind asking them to sit and listen to things they



don't believe. In fact, we take them to church, hoping they'll do precisely that. But when we all stand up and say the creed, don't we feel that we should give permission for a person *not* to do that? I think we recognise that to speak something out aloud has a certain moral force: it's a way of committing yourself, at some level, to those words. And to sing something is to take it a step further: it's adding an emotional commitment to that moral commitment. When we use our bodies like that—when we habituate ourselves to using our bodies to praise—it will, I think, steadily convert agreement with a fact into a different type of commitment to that fact.

## Activity 3: Speak

If you want the Psalms to shape you as deeply as possible, I recommend that you say them aloud. Where appropriate, even sing them aloud—not just when you go to church; try, if you're feeling a bit dangerous, to find somewhere where you won't disturb anybody else and say the Psalms aloud in your private devotions. I know this is possibly the most impossible thing I've said all night, but see if you can't talk your music leaders into using psalms in public worship. It is a tall order, and at Moore College, where I look after chapel, we've tried numerous solutions, and the only one that has worked has been to sing metrical psalms together like the Presbyterians still do, and like the Anglicans used to. (We invented them; we just lost them.)

So what I want to do for our final experiment is I'm going to make you sing. I'm going to get you to sing the metrical version of Psalm 146. I'd love to do a bit of a comparison, but we haven't really left time. Metrical psalms, in case you don't know, are simply psalms that are made to have rhyme and rhythm so that you can sing them to any hymn tune you like—for example, Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Try to read the psalm silently: say it aloud. See how it feels different to you. See how it engages you differently. Now let's stand up, pull out your hymn sheets and let's sing.

### *Psalm 146*

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD, my soul.

<sup>2</sup> I will praise the LORD all my life;

I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

<sup>3</sup> Do not put your trust in princes,

in human beings, who cannot save.

<sup>4</sup> When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;

on that very day their plans come to nothing.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD their God.

<sup>6</sup> He is the Maker of heaven and earth,  
the sea, and everything in them—  
he remains faithful forever.

<sup>7</sup> He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.

### *Psalm 146 (metrical version)*

Praise the LORD, sing hallelujah!

O my soul, sing out God's praise.

<sup>2</sup> While I live I'll praise Jehovah;  
praise my God through all my days.

<sup>3</sup> Put no confidence in princes,  
nor on human help depend;  
<sup>4</sup> when he dies the dust shall claim him,  
and that day his plans shall end.

<sup>5</sup> Happy is the one who chooses  
Jacob's God to be his aid.  
<sup>6</sup> He is blest whose hope of blessing  
on the LORD his God is stayed.

Heav'n and earth are his creation,  
seas and all that they contain;  
this is all the LORD's own doing,

The LORD sets prisoners free,  
<sup>8</sup> the LORD gives sight to the blind,  
 the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,  
 the LORD loves the righteous.  
<sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the foreigner  
 and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
 but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.  
<sup>10</sup> The LORD reigns forever,  
 your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD.

loyal love he will maintain.  
<sup>7</sup> He delivers from oppression,  
 feeds the hungry in their plight.  
 God leads prisoners out to freedom,  
<sup>8</sup> God restores the blind their sight.  
 God lifts up those bent with anguish;  
 God loves all the righteous ones;  
<sup>9</sup> Yes, the LORD befriends the stranger,  
 orphans, widows he sustains.  
 He upturns the wicked's pathway,  
<sup>10</sup> evermore the LORD is King;  
 Your God, Zion, reigns forever.  
 Hallelujah to him sing!

Rowland S. Ward, *The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing*, Melbourne, 1991.

If you like this, go and do it in church. There are excellent resources; I've given you one where this one came from. You might need to hunt a little bit. But music leaders out there: go for it.

I think it's important to find ways of praising God with everything that we are—not just with our minds, but with our bodies. That's why I wanted Fiona to give us some of her paintings. That's why I wanted us to think about doing literary creations—writing your own psalms. There are so many ways to work these psalms into our lives.

There's a writer called James K Smith who's very thoughtful on the issue of what it takes to be changed by something you believe. He makes the point that he's convinced of so many things he never does anything about—for example, that he should recycle more, or that he should take action about global warming. He tried to analyse why some things we think change us, and why some things we think don't really change us, and his observation is that we need our *imaginations* to be captured, not just our agreement to something. There's a narrative imagination that we need to be caught up into so that we'll feel a part of this thing.

The narratives that shape us are all secular and they're incredibly powerful: they're advertising, they're shopping malls, they're television, they're sitcoms. Everything we do—from the moment we go out to the moment we come down—is giving us a narrative—a narrative of our imagination. There's a lovely quote attributed Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the guy who wrote *The Little Prince*: he says, "If you want to build a boat, don't send people out to gather wood and give them tasks to do, but give them a vision of the vastness of the ocean."

But what does it take to have a counter narrative set up? How can we reclaim our imaginations? We evangelicals overrate the intellect, because we think if you've fixed it with your intellect, you've got it nailed. But the Reformers and the Puritans, they all knew that was wrong. This is not a new discovery. James K Smith has put into new dress something that wise people have always known. As Ashley Null likes to paraphrase

Cranmer, “What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies”. We think we’re controlled by our minds, but we’re not.

The Psalms give us an opportunity to put the word of God into us—into our whole bodies. The gospel is the narrative that the Psalms tell us in poetry. So this is not *all* about the psalms; this is about being caught up in the gospel story at the level of our imaginations so that it’s what we dream. And if we can encourage one another to do that, just a little bit, then, hopefully, tonight hasn’t been a waste of time.