

Living Word BIBLE STUDIES



PSALMS

VOLUME 2

Finding the Way to Prayer and Praise

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON

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Psalms, Volume 1: Songs along the Way

Psalms, Volume 2: Finding the Way to Prayer and Praise

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PSALMS

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*Finding the Way
to
Prayer and Praise*

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



P U B L I S H I N G

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FOREWORD

David, Michelangelo's masterwork, was unveiled in Florence in the year 1504. The marble statue stands seventeen feet tall and is a most powerful sculpture. Strong in every respect, *David* is chiseled with an intensity that captures the biblical hero's confidence. The eyes are fixed, his head is turned toward the left, and the famous sling is held in his left hand, falling over his left shoulder. The general impression is of a young man fully capable of slaying a giant.

The real David lived some 2500 years before Michelangelo chiseled his image. His strength was not limited to the making of war; he was also a master of words. The book of 2 Samuel remembers him as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (23:1), an apt title indeed! The real David was not merely God's anointed warrior king, but a musician, a shepherd boy, and a poet—a man of letters before the world had many of them.

Michelangelo and the real David both created masterful art, one using marble and one using words. One cut a figure from stone and one shaped verses to stir the soul. Like Michelangelo's art, David's art, that of writing masterful poetry, is a difficult skill to practice well. That said, it doesn't follow that we shouldn't learn how to *read* poetry well. In fact, with a willing spirit and a well-informed teacher, you and I can learn to read the poetry of the Bible in ways that nourish our lives.

FOREWORD

This is precisely where Kathleen Nielson's training comes in. In this second volume on selected psalms, Nielson mentors us in the ways of poetry, David's favorite form of expression. In doing so, she equips us to get the most out of this biblical genre—whether or not David was the author of the particular psalm we are reading! With her expertise in literature and the English language, Kathleen understands how poetry works and why it is often the best medium for teaching us the wonders of God's ways. She leads us into the Psalms, a book of poetry that sends the lifeblood of God's Spirit back into our marbled souls.

David R. Helm
Pastor, Holy Trinity Church, Hyde Park
Chairman, The Charles Simeon Trust

A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read!* We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading . . . observing the words . . . seeing the shape of a book and a passage . . . asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it . . . digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

INTRODUCTION

Hearing requests for a second volume on the Psalms, I have responded that the first volume was meant to encourage readers to study all the rest of the psalms on their own! However, through becoming more involved not just in teaching Bible studies but also in teaching others how to study the Bible, I have realized that it would be helpful to offer more explicit direction in learning how to study the Psalms. That's what this second volume aims to do, in a quite basic way.

The goal here is to take in deeply another representative selection of psalms, and to learn more about how to take them in. This volume exposes some of the process beneath the surface of the other studies—which on the one hand gives more help to readers, and on the other hand enables them to work more on their own.¹ After the introductory Lesson One, each lesson guides the study of one psalm and then provides the tools in Day Four for more independent study of another thematically related psalm. Each lesson ends with looking back over the two psalms studied and hiding some of their words in our hearts.

The Psalms teach God's people how to praise and pray. These 150 poems are the well-worn hymnbook and prayer book of

1. Considerations such as these led me to write *Bible Study: Following the Ways of the Word* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), which might be helpful for those who wish to think further about why and how we study the Bible. I would also recommend *Dig Deeper*, by Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

generations of those who have put their faith in the one Lord God. The Psalms were gathered in various collections as early as the time of Moses and written mainly during the days of the kingdom, but the final form was probably established by those who served in the rebuilt temple after the exiled Jews had returned to Jerusalem. Lesson One of this study establishes the central context of the kingdom and the most common author, King David. Suffice it to say here that this Spirit-inspired poetry is *from* God's gathered people and *for* God's gathered people—from back in Old Testament times all the way to now, in the church today. What better proof than these enduring psalms that the one true God has been working throughout human history to redeem a people for himself, through his anointed King.

These psalms will indeed point us to God's redemptive plan accomplished by his anointed King Jesus. We must begin studying, though, not by looking far ahead but by looking carefully into the text of each psalm. The aim will be to take in the words of the psalms as carefully as possible—relishing the poetic language, the shape of each psalm, its meaning in its original form and context. The beautiful truth is that we don't have to impose the light of Jesus on the psalms. When we study them deeply, we find they connect us deeply, on many levels, to the Lord God who made us and loves us and saves us through his Son. God's redemptive plan shines out from the heart of the psalms. The more we understand them, the more they turn our thoughts (sometimes directly and sometimes more indirectly) to the promised Christ who came; who died for us, bearing our sin; who rose again, conquering death; and who reigns in heaven until that day when he comes again to judge the earth and to reign forever with his people. As we study, the psalms begin to resonate with the story of redemption that holds Scripture together from beginning to end. They are at the heart of that story, as they express the heartfelt prayers and praises of a people in need of a Redeemer God.

Starting with the text also means we will not start by offering our personal responses to the text. We'll aim first to look neither far ahead nor deep inside ourselves, but rather into the words God inspired. If we start there, we can hope to end up, by God's grace, with the most profound and appropriate sorts of personal responses—ones that grow out of hearing God's voice in his Word.

How crucial to remember that our study of the Bible is never just academic or purely intellectual. To study God's Word is to lean in close to the very breath of God as, by his Spirit, these living and active words reveal him to us. I know of no better balm for the heart than to listen well to God's voice that so mercifully speaks to us in his Word.

May we hear God speaking to us in the Psalms. May we learn better how to offer words of praise and prayer to him. And may we, at the conclusion of this study, be encouraged to study all the rest of the psalms on our own!



Lesson 1 (Psalm 2)

REMEMBERING THE WAY OF THE PSALMS

This lesson aims to immerse us in the book of Psalms so that we will be ready to dig into individual psalms in the lessons ahead. Volume 1 used Psalm 1 in the introductory lesson; here in Volume 2 we will use Psalm 2, as we make our way into the riches of this book. To delight in and meditate on the Psalms is a lifelong process. It is good to step back from time to time in that process and remember just what makes up the book of Psalms. Here's one way to say it: *The Psalms are cries from the kingdom that focus on God the King, voicing the true experience of kingdom life through poetry fit for a King!*

DAY ONE—THE PSALMS ARE CRIES FROM THE KINGDOM

1. The huge majority of psalms were composed in the context of the kingdom of Israel, with King David as the

most common writer. From the two following passages, what can you observe about this context of King David and the kingdom?

a. 2 Samuel 23:1–7

b. 1 Chronicles 16

2. As David led his people in worship of God, the Psalms formed a great part of that worship, often by being sung. The word *psalm* comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for *song*.

a. Now that you've read 1 Chronicles 16, notice and comment on some of the psalms' titles, such as in Psalm 4: "To the choirmaster, with stringed

instruments. A Psalm of David.” Look specifically at Psalms 4–6 and 73–83.

- b. How might all this historical context affect our reading and understanding of the Psalms?
-
3. David clearly knew he was inspired by God’s Spirit to write these words (2 Sam. 23:2). As we approach the Psalms as part of the Scriptures breathed out by God, what are some of the implications for how we should study them (and perhaps also how we *shouldn’t*)? (See also 2 Timothy 3:16.)

4. Like Saul before him, David was anointed as king. For background on the anointing of a king of Israel, read 1 Samuel 9:27–10:1 and 16:11–13. Then read Psalm 2:1–6. In relation to Israel's anointed kings, what is the main message here?

5. Day Two will unfold the kingdom further. For now, from both Psalm 1 and Psalm 2:1–6, list some of the very basic truths that emerge about God and about human beings. Psalms 1 and 2 have often been called the gateway into the book of Psalms: the truths established here at the start shape our perspective on all the psalms to come.

DAY TWO—THE PSALMS FOCUS ON GOD THE KING

1. Numerous psalms celebrate the anointed king. Observe, for example, Psalm 45:1–7. Write several basic observations.

2. What happened to David's kingdom eventually? Skim the end of the story in 2 Chronicles 36.

3. But what had God promised David in 2 Samuel 7:12–17? This promise certainly refers to David's son, the great King Solomon, but how can we tell that it also refers to one greater than Solomon?

4. Now read Psalm 2:7–9, in which the anointed King actually speaks, echoing the promise to David that we just read. Then turn to the New Testament and read Hebrews 1:1–9 (not to understand every detail, but to get the main argument). What is Hebrews telling us about these Old Testament words?

5. The context of the whole Bible lets us understand that God has fully revealed himself in the promised King Jesus.
 - a. Read God's words to Jesus in Mark 1:9–11. Read Jesus' words in Mark 1:14–15, as he begins his public earthly ministry. How do these verses help confirm that Psalm 2 is pointing to Jesus?

 - b. What strong truths about this King emerge in Psalm 2:7–9?

The Psalms light up God the King: his creation of the world, his sovereign hand over all creation, his judgment of sin, and his promised forgiveness and deliverance for those who repent and turn to him. All these ways of God are made known to us fully in Jesus Christ his Son. The Psalms focus us on God—and they point us to Christ (sometimes quite directly, as in Psalm 2, and sometimes more indirectly). Finally, on this day, read and meditate on all of Psalm 2, in light of the fact that it points to Christ. (*Christ* comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew *anointed*.)

DAY THREE—THE PSALMS VOICE THE TRUE
EXPERIENCE OF KINGDOM LIFE

1. The Psalms light up the eternal King, but they do it in the voices and from the experience of real people living in his kingdom. Many have observed the amazing breadth of human experience touched on by the Psalms. Page through the first ten psalms, for example, skimming just the first few verses of each. What various experiences and tones do you find represented?

2. The Psalms are divided into five books, but they follow no clear logical order. Certain categories emerge (and sometimes overlap), such as royal psalms, messianic psalms, praise psalms, penitential psalms, wisdom psalms, psalms of lament, worship psalms, imprecatory psalms, and so forth. What truths about God and about ourselves might the breadth of these categories teach us?

3. God's people for centuries used the Psalms as regular texts for their prayers and praises in temple worship. Jesus would have used them in this way. Considering the Psalms' broad reach into human experience, in what ways might regular reading of them teach us how to pray and praise?

4. Psalm 119 is a prayer celebrating God's Word and asking God to help us walk in its light through all the experiences of life to the end. Read Psalm 119:25-40, praying these verses particularly in relation to your study of the Psalms. Write down and meditate on a couple of verses that stand out.

5. What kinds of prayers might Psalm 2 teach you to pray?

DAY FOUR—THE PSALMS GIVE US
POETRY FIT FOR A KING!

The Psalms are poetry! This poetry is not just an extra decoration to be noticed if we have time. Studying the form of a psalm is a crucial part of studying (and delighting in) the meaning. We'll notice three aspects of this Old Testament poetry.

1. First, *poetic shape*. Poetry comes in various forms, but in the Psalms it comes in the form of 150 separate poems, each with its own shape from beginning to end. Sometimes the shape is quite clear; sometimes it's debatable. Sometimes there is more than one possible shape. If your Bible edition divides the text into sections for you, it's a good idea not always to take those divisions as fact but rather to read the text and see for yourself. Psalm 2 falls rather neatly into four sections—like a kind of drama in four acts, each with a distinct voice emerging.
 - a. Identify four sections of Psalm 2. What title and brief description might you give to each one?

- b. Now look at the four sections together, as they move from beginning to end of this poem. How do they hold together? Explain briefly how we might see these sections developing one main idea or train of thought.

As we look at each poem, we will aim to find its main idea—a central theme that holds it together from beginning to end. For Psalm 2, for example, we might conclude that the main idea is something like: *God has set his anointed King over all the nations.* That could sum up the four sections, which show three different perspectives on that anointed King followed by a warning about him. Another possibility might be: *God's anointed King over all nations will bring judgment on all who rebel.* The more we come to know the psalm and its whole shape, the more clearly we will be able to get at the main idea.

2. A second aspect of Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*. Hebrew poetry comes in parallel units of meaning, often two but sometimes three or more units, which in English

we see as lines on the page. Three kinds of parallelism are generally acknowledged:

- antithetic parallelism (The lines offer contrasting ideas.)
- synonymous parallelism (The lines offer similar ideas.)
- synthetic parallelism (The lines develop an idea from one line into the next, in a number of possible ways.)

Psalm 2 is full of synonymous parallelism, in which a second line basically repeats an idea, *but always with differences that deepen the meaning*. Find and comment on two examples of synonymous parallelism in Psalm 2.

3. A third aspect of this poetry is its *imagery*. Poetry in general uses concrete pictures to communicate—pictures like those of “bonds” and “cords” in Psalm 2:3.
 - a. What do these pictures in Psalm 2:3 make you see and understand?

- b. Sometimes pictures resonate throughout Scripture. (Think of bread, and water, and light, for example.) How might Hosea 11:4 help you process the pictures in Psalm 2:3?

 - c. What do the pictures in Psalm 2:9 make you see and understand?
4. About a third of the Bible is poetry—magnificent poetry, fit for a King! We enrich our understanding of God's Word when we notice the way the poetry communicates. Why do you think God filled his inspired Word with so much poetry?

DAY FIVE—TAKE IT IN

We've developed this summary of what makes up the book of Psalms: *The Psalms are cries from the kingdom that focus on God the King, voicing the true experience of kingdom life through poetry fit for a King!* We've glimpsed the promised King Jesus, who brought the kingdom to us; God sent his own Son (this King!) to dwell among us. It was this King who died in our place, the perfect sacrifice to accomplish the forgiveness of our sins.

One more thing needs to be clear: we are called to respond. Jesus came proclaiming the gospel and calling people to respond in faith. The whole Bible is God's voice to us, and by his Spirit we are called to respond.

1. The Psalms teach us well how to respond! For example, in the fourth and final section of Psalm 2, the psalmist calls kings and rulers to respond rightly to God's anointed King (see verse 10—and recall verse 2!). How might the kinds of responses in Psalm 2:10–12 be especially important for any kind of earthly ruler? How do these verses reach out to apply to any of us as well? Spend some moments in prayer, taking time to respond personally to your heavenly King.

2. The final day of each lesson will ask you to reread the psalm(s) studied and to choose a verse or passage you would like to memorize. Let's begin with Psalm 2. Write out your chosen verse or passage and commit it to memory (or begin to do so!). Make these words a part of your thinking and your prayers. Be ready, if you wish, to tell your group why you picked these words and how they are working in your heart. By the end of the study, with regular review, you should have a collection of personal treasures from the Psalms.

Kathleen Nielson takes us on a second tour of well-chosen individual psalms, helping us take in their poetry deeply. She further shows us how to keep teaching the Psalms to ourselves through individual study.

“Kathleen Nielson’s inductive Bible studies have become standard tools for small groups reading the Bible together who are eager to understand what it says and how to live it out. These studies do not replace commentaries; rather, by asking shrewd questions, they teach people how to read, especially how to read God’s holy Word for themselves. This second volume on select Psalms maintains the high standards of the earlier studies.”

—D. A. CARSON, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

“This is another fantastic Bible study resource from Kathleen. What comes across in all of her studies is a passionate love of the text and a disciplined study of its treasure, all while she shows us how it points forward to Christ. She not only uncovers the treasures that are to be found in these wonderful poems but, even more importantly, teaches us how to mine them for ourselves.”

—CARRIE SANDOM, Associate Minister for Women, St. John’s, Tunbridge Wells, UK

“Each time I pick up a Bible study written by Kathleen, I’m certain she has composed a work that comes from her own delight in God’s Word and her calling to provide excellent study guides for fellow students of Scripture. This study of Psalms is compelling and offers an invitation for us to explore the Psalms and learn how they connect to all of God’s Word, pointing us ultimately to Christ. The women in our church will enjoy this study, I am sure, for it will show them what it means to be human beings before God and will train them in responding to him.”

—KARI STAINBACK, Director of Women’s Ministries, Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas

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