

*Living Word*  
BIBLE  
STUDIES

# PSALMS

VOLUME 1

*Songs Along the Way*

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



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VOLUME 1

# *Living Word* BIBLE STUDIES

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# PSALMS

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## FOREWORD

Today we would call them Christians, but in those days they were sometimes referred to as people who belonged to “the Way” (see Acts 9:2). “The Way” was the way of Jesus, the way he taught his disciples to follow.

We still use the same terminology today to describe our earthly pilgrimage. As we make our own way in the world, we speak of people losing their way, or finding their way, or being on their way. In Christian circles, we also talk about the way of salvation, which can only be found in Jesus. “I *am* the way,” he said to his disciples (John 14:6).

This way of speaking did not begin with Jesus but goes all the way back to the Psalms. The very first psalm contrasts “the way of the righteous” with “the way of the wicked.” This theme then runs all the way through the Psalter. There are two and only two ways to live: God’s way and the way of fallen humanity. Which way will you live? The Psalms help us to choose and then to live our choice.

This study guide is designed to help you make your way through the book of Psalms. The psalms selected cover nearly the full range of material that we find in the Bible’s first hymnal. There are psalms of praise and prayer, of suffering and danger, of worship and triumph.

For each kind of psalm, Kathleen Nielson uses her gift for writing clear and compelling questions to help us deal directly

with the biblical text. Since she is a poet in her own right, Dr. Nielson has a special sensitivity to the inner workings of biblical poetry. To use her study guide, therefore, is to learn the right way to read, sing, pray, memorize, and meditate on the Psalms.

At the same time, we learn the ways of God. Perhaps more than any other part of the Bible, the book of Psalms gives us a complete overview of God's character. We learn what God loves and hates, what he desires and demands, what he does and plans to do. As John Calvin explained in the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms*:

There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise.

The reason the Psalms tell us so much about God—and help us to praise him so well—is that they were written by God himself. The biblical psalms were written by David, of course, as well as by Asaph and other godly men. But they are also the creative product of God the Holy Spirit.

As we read, therefore, God is helping us find our way to him. He is giving us a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (see Ps. 119:105). My prayer is that as you study these psalms, with the help of this study guide, the Holy Spirit will lead you in “the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:24).

Philip Graham Ryken

# 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

The way of the Psalms is a well-traveled and blessed way! Not just the psalmists but also God's people throughout many generations have used these words to find their way and to express their prayers and praises to their God along the way. The book of Psalms, often called the Psalter, is the well-worn hymnbook and prayer book of generations of those who have put their faith in the one Lord God.

The title "Psalms" comes from the Greek *psalmoi*, meaning "songs to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument." This was the title used in the days of Jesus. He grew up hearing and learning the psalms sung regularly in temple worship. They were part of the daily devotion and worship of God's people, as they had been already for centuries. The ancient Hebrew title for this collection was *tehillim*, meaning "praise songs." They were gathered and used in various collections as early as the time of Moses, but the final form was probably established by those who served in the rebuilt temple after the exiled Jews had returned to Jerusalem. Thus, the Psalter has often been called "the prayer book for the second temple."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the scroll of Psalms appeared first in the third division called "the Writings," following "the Law" and "the Prophets." The Writings, then, from the beginning appear in the context of a chosen people who had received God's law

through his prophets. The Psalms are the songs and prayers of people called to live in that community of faith and obedience. It is appropriate that the majority of the psalms were written during the years of the monarchy in Israel, for those years, especially under David and Solomon, gave the clearest early picture of what God's kingdom looks like. The Psalms are cries from the kingdom. Even though subsequent generations have learned that God's promised kingdom is larger and greater than the nation of Israel with Jerusalem and its temple at the center, these cries still ring with universal and eternal truth. They celebrate a King like David and Solomon—only much greater. And they point out the path of obedience and blessing for all the subjects of that King (as well as the contrasting path of disobedience and destruction).

Lesson One will provide a more detailed introduction to the book of Psalms. Here let us make three general observations. First, the Psalms clearly show us the ways of God. This collection is certainly not a theological treatise; however, in the course of all the prayers and songs and praises, we cannot fail to grasp the nature and character of the Lord God who is being praised and addressed. His attributes are named and celebrated repeatedly. His ways of dealing with his people are uncovered. The story of his plan and care for Israel (and for his everlasting kingdom) is set forth with overflowing thanksgiving. The inspired seeds of prophecy concerning his redemptive plan, centered in Jesus Christ his Son, are beautifully evident. Even his just punishment of sin, the holy wrath of a holy God, and the final torment of those who reject him emerge with a vividness many find hard to take in. In the Psalms, we can find the whole story of God's dealings with the human creatures he created, from beginning to end. Let us look in the Psalms to find the ways of God.

Second, the Psalms clearly show us the ways of words. What beautiful poetic language is here for us to take in with all our minds, hearts, and imaginations. What true and pleasing rhythms of human experience unfold through the parallel lines of the

poetry. What beauty here reflects and celebrates the creativity of God our Maker, who by his word made the world. We are following after our Creator when we follow the power and beauty of these words he inspired. To dig deep into the Psalms, we must dig with relish into their poetic language. Lesson One will provide more specific helps in understanding and appreciating the poetry. Let us look in the Psalms to find the ways of words.

Finally, the Psalms point us to the ways of prayer. These psalms *are* the prayers of God's people, written by them under his inspiration and then used by them for centuries. We make only feeble excuses concerning our inability to pray, when we have such words at our disposal to incorporate into our own prayers. Our increasing unfamiliarity with the words of the Psalter has surely contributed to the struggles and superficialities of our prayers. When the prophet Jonah found himself buried inside a fish in the depths of the sea, he was able to call on Psalms 18, 42, and others, in order to weave together the remarkable prayer of Jonah 2. He had hidden those words in his heart, and they made his prayers rich and fruitful. When Mary found she was with child, carrying the very Son of God, how was she able to give forth such an incredible prayer as we find in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55)? She knew the Scriptures. The Psalms especially were in her, and she wove together lines from Psalms 72, 98, 103, and others to pour forth her glorious song to the Lord. The Psalms can teach us how to pray. Let us look in the Psalms to find the ways of prayer.

One last comment on this study, which is the simplest and most uncomplicated one of all my studies: it would be possible to hurry through and be done too quickly with the lessons. I hope you will spend time in the Psalms themselves—musing, marking, meditating, memorizing, and praying. The Psalms will richly reward such time, both presently and in the joys and sorrows of future years.

May the Lord God himself bless this study as we follow the way of the Psalms.



# Lesson 1

## THE WAY OF THE PSALMS

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This lesson aims to point out the way of the Psalms: to set forth the basic background that will help us dig into the riches of these worship poems. The lesson looks longer than it is! One of the goals is to do a lot of paging through the Psalms in order to become acquainted with the book as a whole before we focus on parts of it.

### DAY ONE—THE PSALTER’S SHAPE AND BACKGROUND

To prepare for a study of the Psalms, let us first see the shape and background of the whole book—which is divided into five separate books. Drawing a parallel with the five books in the law of Moses (often called the Pentateuch), some have called the Psalms “the Pentateuch of David.”

- I. What do you observe in the concluding verses of each of the five books?
  - Psalm 41:13

LESSON 1

- Psalm 72:18–20

- Psalm 89:52

- Psalm 106:48

- Psalm 150:6

2. Psalms written by David make up the majority of Books I, II, and V—nearly half the Psalter. Other psalms, both within and without the Psalter, surely were written by him as well. What do we know about David from the following passages?

a. 1 Samuel 16:11–23

b. 2 Samuel 23:1–7

c. 1 Chronicles 6:31–48

## LESSON 1

3. What do the superscriptions of various psalms tell us concerning other authors and various contexts of the Psalms? Comment on the introductory text notes of the psalms listed below.

### *Helpful facts:*

- *The sons of Korah and Asaph were from the tribe of Levi, in charge of tabernacle, and later temple, care and worship activities.*
- *The “maskil” and the “miktam” were probably musical compositions used in worship.*
- *Some of the unidentified words may be names of tunes.*
- *A “song of ascents” was probably sung in a procession of worshipers walking up to the temple in Jerusalem, the city built high on Mount Zion.*
- *“Selah,” a Hebrew word interspersed throughout the Psalter, may have musical or liturgical significance.*

a. Psalm 45

b. Psalm 67

c. Psalm 70

d. Psalm 75

e. Psalm 90

f. Psalms 120–134

## DAY TWO—THE PSALTER’S POETRY

To appreciate the way the Psalms were written, it is necessary to use a translation that presents their poetry in discernible lines. Hebrew poetry’s central characteristic is its balancing of lines (or units of thought) in a structure often called parallelism. Most often, two (or sometimes three) “parallel lines” balance together to create meaning. For each of the three generally accepted kinds of parallelism explained below, look through the first several chapters of Psalms and try to find a couple more examples.

1. *Synonymous parallelism*—The second line basically repeats the idea of the first line, in different words (thus adding new shades of meaning).
  - a. Psalm 3:1

LESSON 1

b.

c.

2. *Antithetic parallelism*—The second line presents a contrasting idea.

a. Psalm 18:27

b.

c.

3. *Synthetic parallelism*—The second line continues or adds to the meaning of the first.

a. Psalm 7:10

b.

c.

Even in this exercise, we see that the categories are not always hard and fast. However, the general structure of parallelism appears consistently in the Psalms' poetry. To look for the method and beauty of this structure helps the reader take in this part of God's Word most effectively. How wonderful that, in God's good providence, this parallelism is quite easily captured in translation. The nuances of sound and rhythm are not, but the main characteristic is. We can get close to what the writers—and the Lord!—intended.

Another characteristic of this poetry involves *imagery*, the pictures that lead us to understand God's truth imaginatively and deeply. As we study, let us prepare to note, muse on, and take in the imagery that God inspired in the Psalms.

4. For a start, as we consider imagery, read Psalm I, chosen to introduce the Psalter. This psalm sets forth two kinds of people, two paths with two different ends, based on two different relationships to God's law. What two main *similes* (comparisons using "like" or "as") picture these two kinds of people?

5. Briefly, how do these pictures deepen our understanding of the psalm's meaning?

DAY THREE—THE PSALTER'S  
BREADTH AND DEPTH

The Psalms reach out and touch just about every imaginable human emotion or expression. In general, from a brief look at the beginning verses of the following psalms, what different kinds of situations and/or expressions can you observe?

- Psalm 4
- Psalm 9
- Psalm 13
- Psalm 15
- Psalm 19
- Psalm 20
- Psalm 21

- Psalm 30
- Psalm 33
- Psalm 37
- Psalm 51
- Psalm 59
- Psalm 67
- Psalm 96
- Psalm 137

And that's only a glimpse! One can understand why both individual believers and worshiping bodies have regularly used the whole progression of psalms to express all their praise, petitions, questionings, thanksgiving, confession, trust, etc., before a God who is worthy of and sufficient for every expression.

DAY FOUR—THE PSALTER'S SAVIOR

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible presents one unified story about God redeeming a people for himself, through the Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the crux of the story, how does he shine through in the book of Psalms?

For each of the following, read first the verses from the Psalms, then read the New Testament verses, and then summarize briefly how you see Jesus shining through the psalm.

1. Psalm 2:1–6 (cf. John 1:41, 49; 18:36–37; Acts 4:23–27)  
*Note: the Greek word Christ and the Hebrew word Messiah both mean literally “the Anointed One.”*

2. Psalm 2:7–12 (cf. Matt. 3:16–17; Acts 13:32–33; Heb. 1:1–5)

3. Psalm 22:1–18 (cf. Matt. 27:32–46)

How amazing to glimpse the ways God inspired the psalmists to write of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the one who came as a suffering servant to die for us, the eternal King who reigns on the throne of David, and the one who comes to judge the world. Let us be watchful for Jesus shining through the Psalms as we read and study them.

## DAY FIVE—CONCLUSIONS

Having finished this lesson, we have finished only a brief introduction to the Psalms. Having completed the whole study, we will have met only a representative selection of psalms. Let us pray that this study will help lead us into a lifetime of rich communion with God through the Psalms.

To conclude—and to begin!—reread Psalm I, which stands at the beginning of the Psalter like an open gate inviting us to enter and follow the way of the righteous who delight in God's law—not the way that leads to destruction. The Psalms will help lead us in the right way, following God's law and God's people who have gone before. Having reread Psalm I, write your own prayer based on it.

Thoughts and Observations—Psalm 16

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