

## Songs for Sojourners (An Introduction to Psalms, Book 1)

Psalms 1–41

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Michael Felkins

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I use this text to kick off our series because of its extensive use of the Psalms. The writer of Hebrews used nine Psalms references in twenty-three verses.

However, this is not the text we will be working from this morning. Because this is an introductory message, it will be structured differently. You will need to keep your Bible handy because I will be referencing a lot of texts.

Have you ever watched an old TV show that doesn't have a soundtrack that runs in the background? I've seen a few, and it is weird to see the old shows without music in the background. When there is no soundtrack, sometimes you can't tell whether you should laugh or it should be serious. There is just this awkward silence in conversations. When there is a soundtrack in the background, you can tell when the scary part of the show is coming up. The soundtrack ratchets up the intensity of the story. I've often joked with Stacy that life goes better with a soundtrack.

If the Bible is a story, then the Book of Psalms is the soundtrack for the story. Psalms is the music that plays when your soul doesn't know what to say or feel. From shouts of joy to cries of despair, Psalms covers the full range of human emotion and experience.

Here's another key fact about the Psalms. It is not only the soundtrack for the Bible, but it also tells the comprehensive story of God's redemption of His people. In other words, the Psalms are not like the playlist on your phone. It's not like *Apple Music* or *Spotify*, where you just hear selected songs from the best albums. The Psalms can certainly be read that way, but that is not the primary way they are intended to be understood.

So, how should we think of the Psalms? Think of the Psalms as a musical. Think of *Les Misérables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or, closer to home, the musicals *Oklahoma* or *The Music Man* (set in the fictional town of River City, Iowa). While each song in the musical is good and is enjoyable as a stand-alone song, that was not how the songs were designed to be heard. The songs in those musicals were intended to tell the unfolding of the story of the musical.

Likewise, the Psalms are the playlist of God's redemptive story. Although each Psalm can stand on its own, when it is understood and heard in the context of the larger redemptive story, it is more powerful. The beauty of the songs of the Psalms is the unfolding of redemption's story and declaring the glory of God.

Now, with this in mind, I want to prepare you for this morning's sermon. It will have two major sections. The first section, I am calling: *The Framework of Psalms for the Head*. This section will provide an introduction to some of the fundamental aspects of the Psalms. I will primarily cover Psalms 1 through 41, but I will give you plenty of information about the whole book. Remember, I have put together a small booklet on an introduction to the Psalms, which covers more introductory information than I will provide in the sermon.

The second section will develop the *Framework of the Psalms for the Heart*. In this section, we will explore some of the Psalms in Book 1. We will see how the Psalms shape our hearts, lives, and our church as we travel *the sojourners' road* with our King.

## I. The Framework of the Psalms for the Head

Here I want to answer the question: What do we need to know about the Psalms as we get started? What introductory information will help us understand the Psalms on this journey?

### A. The Psalms and Their Authors

First, the Psalter is a collection of 150 psalms. Each Psalm is considered a chapter, making the Psalms the largest book in the Bible. It contains the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, which is 176 verses, and the shortest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 117, and that's only two verses.

Second, although many human writers contributed to the Psalms, God is the ultimate author. *David* wrote approximately half of the Psalms. Other authors include *Asaph*, *the sons of Korah* (who were most likely a group of worship leaders at the temple), *Solomon* wrote at least two, possibly four, *Moses* wrote one, and *Heman*, and *Ethan*, wrote one and there are *forty-eight* anonymous authors.

These 150 Psalms are divided into five books or sections. Our series will only cover Book 1, which is Psalms 1–41. King David wrote most of the Psalms in Book 1.

King David was the second king of Israel. He wrote many of his songs at different points in his life. As you may recall, before David became King of Israel, he was a shepherd who spent most of his time tending sheep in the fields. He spent a lot of time alone with his sheep. It had to be an obscure and monotonous time of his life. Yet, God used his time in the wilderness to prepare him to be king.

Then we fast-forward to when David had been chosen to be Israel's next King. Yet, soon after that, he was also on the run from the current king, King Saul. When you read some of his Psalms during this period of his life, they sound like anxious journal entries that are ultimately filled with faith and hope in God. David wrote them in poetic form and set them to music.

King David was what we might call a Renaissance Man. He was a warrior-king who wrote poetry, set it to music, played a lyre, and sang his songs to God.

Then, when he was king, we hear him pour out his heart to God for help as he led the nation of Israel. In Psalm 51, we hear his brokenness over his sin. We hear his deep contrition and heartfelt confession of his sin to God because of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah.

King David is considered the "*sweet singer of Israel*." He was a shepherd who became a warrior who became the King of Israel. He was deeply committed to God, but he was not a perfect man.

### B. Design and Intent

The word "*psalms*" comes from a Greek word which means "*the plucking of strings*." It refers to a song to be sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument such as a harp or lyre. While the Psalms is a collection of songs, it is not a hymnbook like the old Baptist Hymnal.

As we work through the Psalms, we will encounter a large variety of songs. There are psalms of *lament* that express the heart's cry of grief and yet trust in God. There are psalms of *thanksgiving*, *praise*, and *wisdom*. There are psalms of *enthronement* that describe the greatness of God's kingship and His sovereign rule. Along the same lines, there are *royal* psalms that serve a prophetic function, because they anticipate the coming of the Messiah as the undisputed King. If you have read through the Psalms, you may have noticed that Book 5 has many songs of *pilgrimage*. These are psalms that the Israelites sang during celebrations or as they traveled to Jerusalem for the celebration. Finally, there are the famous *imprecatory* psalms that are motivated by zeal for God's glory. They are provocative and also controversial because they call for God to act in judgment and wrath upon His enemies.

Next, we need to consider the design of the Psalms and the intent of all the authors as they wrote. While most books of the Bible are straightforward in design and intent, the Psalms are a bit more complex. Each Psalm has its own design and intent, but where it is placed in the Psalter is also important and done with intention.

For example, the first two Psalms were not written by David. They are anonymous Psalms. Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are strategically placed at the beginning of the Psalms. They function as the *Preface* to the whole book.

They highlight the centrality of God's word, the importance of living in righteousness by loving God's word, and trusting in the King God will send.

Psalms 1 and 2 are intentionally placed at the beginning of the Psalms to prepare us as we read God's unfolding story of redemption in poetic form. Not only is God's word inspired, but the design of the Psalms is inspired.

The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17,

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

Notice what the Apostle Paul said as he began v. 16. He said, "*all Scripture is breathed out by God.*" The Greek word "*all*" means "*all*." "*All Scripture is breathed out by God.*" Ultimately, what this means is that God's word is based on the nature and character of God. God's word is an extension of who He is. Just as God is holy, perfect, righteous, complete, has no flaws, no errors, and is infallible, so is His word.

But before the Apostle Paul wrote about God's word in 2 Timothy, King David wrote about the beauty of God's Word in Psalm 19:7-10,

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. <sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold, even much finer gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.*

While I aim to convince you of the inerrancy, infallibility, and authority of God's Word, and I believe these texts do, I also want to persuade you of the divine structure of the Psalms. Those who wrote the Psalms wrote with divine inspiration, and those who organized the Psalter did so under the same divine inspiration and intention.

The whole book of the Psalms was divinely crafted and placed in the order it is in so that when you take all of the Psalms together, they create a storyline from beginning to end. The Psalms poetically sing the redemptive story of God's people. They invite God's people into God's presence while they are exiles and sojourners in this world.

The Psalms are not only divinely inspired songs, but they are also divinely inspired *poetic prophecy*. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 24:44 as He spoke with two of His disciples on the Road to Emmaus. These disciples were downcast because they thought Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah, but now He had been killed by the Pharisees, buried in a tomb, and now the tomb was empty. They didn't understand what was happening, nor did they realize they were walking and talking with Jesus. So, He said to them in Luke 24:25-27, 44:

*"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself . . . <sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

The entire book of Psalms prepares us for the coming of the Messiah, the true King, and tells the story of how He redeemed His people from their sin. Ultimately, it tells one story that points us to Jesus. Just because it is poetry does not mean it isn't prophetic.

Here's something else we need to understand about Hebrew poetry. It is not like Western poetry. It is not about finding words that rhyme, rhythm, and meter. Hebrew poetry is primarily in the form of a *chiasm*. That might be a new word for you. Hebrew poetry uses what is called a *chiastic structure*. For example, one line (we'll call this line "A") states a theological truth, the second line, "B", restates the same theological truth in different words. Then the following line, line "C," is usually the main point. It is the theological heart of the *chiasm*. After the poet has developed this, he would work backwards with a fourth line "BB" and then the last line, which we will call "AA".

But here's the deal: The chiastic structure of a Psalm isn't limited to individual Psalms. Amazingly, each book of the Psalter also exhibits a chiastic structure, as does the entire Psalter. If you look in the booklet I put together for you, you will find a fuller explanation of *chiasms* and *chiastic structure* in Hebrew poetry.

I realize that much of this information on literary structure seems academic and perhaps uninteresting, but when you understand how chiasms work, it helps you to get to the theological heart of the text and therefore rightly interpret the passage. This helps us develop sound doctrine and make solid biblical applications to the Psalms. Ultimately, sound doctrine and correct application lead us to worship Jesus for who He truly is – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is God. This leads me to my next point of the Psalms, worship, and the church.

### C. The Psalms and Worship

Old Testament scholars Christopher Ash and Robert Smith argue that using the Psalms in individual and corporate worship is a means of grace by which the Lord fills us with His Spirit. Ash and Smith work through the Apostle Paul's letters of Colossians and Ephesians to make their case. In Colossians 3, Paul exhorts the church to put on the new self. Then in v.16, Paul says:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

The Apostle Paul makes a similar argument in Ephesians 5:18-21, he writes:

*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,<sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,<sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,<sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Ash and Smith argue that the eight participles used in these two texts teach us that using the Psalms in individual and corporate worship is a *means of grace* to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

I agree with them. As we gather each Sunday and read the Psalms together in our worship services, singing both Psalms and hymns, we are refilled with the Spirit of God and sent out from here, refocused to be Christ's ambassadors wherever He leads us during the week. He gives comfort to the brokenhearted. He gives refreshment to the weary. He gives peace to the anxious. He gives wisdom to the foolish. He saves the lost.

Now that we have established the framework for our minds, let's consider *the framework of the Psalms for our hearts*.

### II. The Framework of the Psalms for the Heart

Brothers and sisters, head and heart go together. As we worked through the literary background of the Psalms, there's no doubt that it informs the hearts. They focus and enrich our worship of God. The Psalms help us say and sing God's words back to Him.

While the Psalms are the musical of God's redemptive story, there is no doubt that we have our favorites within the playlist. There are seasons of our lives when different Psalms become our favorites. In a season of

repenting of sin, Psalm 51 might be a go-to Psalm. In a season of spiritual dryness and pain, Psalm 42 might be what you pray. You may pray the words of the psalmist directly to the Lord by saying:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. <sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? <sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, "Where is your God?"*

Maybe in a season of anxiety and isolation, you learn to pray Psalm 37 to the Lord. Perhaps when you feel vulnerable to some problem or threat, you learn to pray Psalm 91. Finally, perhaps you're in a season of joy and thankfulness, and you spend time praying Psalm 100.

In certain seasons of life, Psalms like these may become your go-to Psalms. They function like a playlist for life, just like the playlist on *Apple Music* or *Spotify*.

You may be like me, and you have your go-to playlist for various occasions. Maybe you've got a "Workout" playlist for when you exercise or go running. Maybe you have a playlist for road trips. You may have some playlists that you go back to again and again because they express something you're feeling.

The Psalms are like that — except inspired by the Holy Spirit. And Book 1 is like the first album in the set. Psalms 1 and Psalms 2 introduce the themes that echo throughout the rest of the book: blessing, suffering, righteousness, trusting in God's word, and being in God's presence. So, let's consider some of the songs in Book 1. Track 1: Psalm 1:1-2: The Man Who Delights in the Word of God

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Psalm 1 isn't just the first psalm — it's the doorway. It sets the stage for the rest of the book. It tells us that the blessed life, the life that flourishes, doesn't come from following the world's advice but from delighting in the Word of God.

Then, in the middle of Psalm 1, the psalmist uses an agricultural metaphor, telling us that the person who delights in the word of God is like a tree planted by water, which produces the fruit of righteousness in every season of life.

When Stacy and I were first married, I served on staff at a church in West Texas. We lived where the West Texas deserts began. Man, the summers were hot and dry. There were not many trees in West Texas. It was flat, dry, and the wind blew like crazy. I often joked that the state tree of West Texas was a telephone pole leaning from west to east.

However, there were some trees out there. They were the ones that flourished in that desert climate, because they had sunk their roots deep in the soil and ultimately in the water aquifer. The only way they survived was to sink their roots deep in the soil to find lifegiving water.

That's what Psalm 1 says the Word of God does for you and me. It roots our lives in Him, even in the dry and scorching heat of this world. We need our hearts and minds to be tapped into the water of God's word.

We will dig into Psalm 1 more next Sunday, but for now, let's ask some questions of ourselves. Are you delighting in the lifegiving water of God's Word? Do you start your day drinking from the stream, or surviving on spiritual fumes? Psalm 1 calls us to do a self-examination of our spiritual life. It challenges us to evaluate our lives to see if we are walking in the way of life or the way of death.

Track 2: A Song of Authentic Faith in God

Brothers and sisters, Book 1 is filled with the voice of King David. Thirty-seven of the forty-one Psalms in Book 1 are attributed to him. Yet, here's the surprise: King David, *the man after God's own heart*, was not always

triumphant. He's often betrayed by his friends, hunted by his enemies, and haunted by his past sins. Listen to the words of some of his songs:

Psalm 3:1,

*O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; <sup>2</sup> many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God."*

Psalm 6:1-3,

*O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. <sup>2</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. <sup>3</sup> My soul also is greatly troubled.*

Psalm 13:1-2,

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? <sup>2</sup> How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

David's psalms aren't polished. They're raw. They often read like a painful journal entry. They're honest. They're not always prayers from the palace; they're often prayers from the basement. They are prayers from the cave. They are prayers from the foxhole on the battlefield. David shows us that faith doesn't mean pretending everything is okay. It means bringing everything to God — even your doubt and despair.

Friends, you don't have to clean up your life or emotions before you pray. You can bring your real self to God, because that's who He wants to meet. As Psalm 62:8 says,

*Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.*

Track 3: God Is Refuge, Shepherd, and Deliverer of His People

One of the recurring words in Book 1 is "*refuge*." Listen to how God protects His people in these Psalms.

Psalm 9:9,

*The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

Psalm 23:1, 4,

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want . . . <sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Psalm 34:18-19,

*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. <sup>19</sup> Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.*

Friends, God is not a cold, distant deity. Our God is a Father who holds our tears in a bottle, as Psalm 56:8 says.

*You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle.*

He is the Refuge in whom we can hide when the storms of life are raging all around us. He is the Shelter in the storm.

Growing up in the South was much like growing up in the Midwest; we had tornado drills in school every fall and spring. When the sirens went off, we made our way to the hall, against the wall, and put our heads down. In the Midwest, you go into the basement of the school, which is even better.

The hallway and the basement were the places where we found protection from the storm. It was our hiding place in those times. That's what God is in the Psalms. He's not just our Provider, but our Protector. He is our Hiding Place in the face of the storms of life.

Friends, the question is, where do you run when life begins to crash all around you? Is God your Refuge, or just your last resort? I hope that as we work through the Psalms, you will begin to make God your Refuge in times of trouble.

#### Track 4: Psalm 41 – Ending Where We Began

Here is one of the amazing literary designs of the Books of the Psalms. Book 1 of Psalms starts and ends with the word "*blessed*."

Remember Psalm 1:1-2,

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Then Psalm 41:1-2, 13, says:

*Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him; <sup>2</sup> the LORD protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; you do not give him up to the will of his enemies . . . <sup>13</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

The first psalm emphasizes the blessing that comes from personal righteousness by delighting in God's word. Psalms 41, the last psalm of Book 1, emphasizes the blessing that comes from relational righteousness. It emphasizes the importance of showing mercy to others.

God is saying: A godly life is not just a *head* full of knowledge, but it goes deep into the *heart* and is demonstrated through our *hands*. It's head, heart, and hands that are given to God.

Here's the question: Do you reflect God's mercy in how you treat the hurting, the poor, the outsider? Psalm 41 says God blesses those who care for the broken, because that's His heart.

As we walk through Book 1, we don't just hear King David's voice. Ultimately, we hear the voice of King Jesus, who is the Son of David. Jesus is the *True Singer* of the Psalms. They point us to Him. These are His songs written for us to sing to Him.

Friends, Jesus is the Truly Blessed Man of Psalm 1. He is the One who is rooted perfectly in the Father's Word. He is our righteousness.

He is the Suffering Servant of Psalm 22. Jesus is the One who cried from the cross, "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*"

He is the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23, who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Finally, Jesus is the One who has become our Refuge, our Righteousness, our Redeemer.

The question is: Are you trusting in Jesus or something else? May the Sojourner's Songs lead you to Christ and ultimately to walk more closely with Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Each Book of the Psalms ends with a "*Amen and Amen*."