

# Psalms

by Ross Callaghan

<http://rosscallaghan.yolasite.com>



The Book of Psalms is the first book of the *Ketuvim* or "Writings", the third section of the Hebrew Bible. The other books in the Ketuvim are *Proverbs* and the *Song of Songs*.

The Hebrew word for Psalm is *tehillim*, תְּהִלִּים, meaning "praises". The English word "Psalm" comes from *mizmor*, the Greek translation of *tehillim*. It means "a melody or song of praise accompanied by instrumental music", typically a harp.

There are 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms in Hebrew and Christian Bibles (and more in the Bibles used by Eastern Christian churches). The Book of Psalms is sometimes called the Psalter, and is widely used as a collection of songs for praising God.

## Authors

Many of the psalms have a title that gives information about who wrote the Psalm, what they were used for, or how they were to be used. From these titles we know 73 Psalms were written by David; 11 were part of the repertoire of the sons of Korah (Psalm 42-49; 84; 85; 87-89); 12 part of the repertoire of the sons of Asaph (Psalm 50;73-83); one of Heman and the sons of Korah (Psalm 88); two were written by Solomon (Psalms 72,127); one by Moses (Psalm 90); and one by Ethan (Psalm 89).

The other psalms are sometimes called "orphan psalms" because no-one knows who wrote them. Some of these may have been written by David, *Israel's singer of songs*. 2 Samuel 23:1. e.g David is described as the author of the orphan Psalm 95 in Hebrews 4:7, and of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:25.

## Type

Wisdom literature. This type of literature uses poetry, songs, stories and writings to teach about God and provide wisdom for life. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are other Old Testament books classified as wisdom literature.

An important principle to recognize when reading the psalms is that they are songs and poems written by men more than 3000 years ago. As such, they represent the feelings, ideas, wisdom and understanding of their writers, and the prevailing culture of the time. They should not necessarily be seen as the words of God!

Most of the psalms were written for or in response to specific events and give broad generalisations about life as it was long ago. This means we can't take isolated verses from the Book of Psalms and say "This is the Word of God". What we can do, though, is glean from the psalms much wisdom that is still relevant today, and use them to help us in our own worship of God.

Over time the Book of Psalms became has become a hymn book used in the Jewish Temple, and in synagogues and churches all over the world.

## Date

David's psalms were obviously written during his lifetime (1040-970 BC.). Psalm 137 was probably written during the exile in Babylon, Psalms 107 and 126 during the return from Babylon, and Psalms 44 and 79 once the exiles were back in Israel.

The Book of Psalms was probably compiled by Ezra around 444 BC, with individual psalms being placed roughly in the chronological order in which they were written. The order currently followed in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles was established before the Old Testament was translated into the Greek Septuagint version between 300-200 BC.

## Background

116 of the 150 psalms include a title giving important background information about the psalm or how it is to be used. Because so many of the psalms are songs of praise for use in the Temple many of the titles contain musical instructions.

- 55 psalms are addressed to the choirmaster, and 23 are linked to the two main guilds of Levitical singers, Asaph and Korah.
- Many of the psalms contain musical directions.
  - *Selah* occurs 71 times and may indicate a pause for reflection or a crescendo.
  - *Higgaion* (Psalm 9:16) may suggest a meditative attitude
  - “*The death of the son*” (Psalm 9), “*The Doe of the Morning*” (Psalm 22), “*Lilies*” (Psalms 45, 69 and 80), “*A Dove on distant Oaks*” (Psalm 56), and “*Do not destroy*” (Psalms 58,59, 75) were the tunes to which the psalms were sung.
  - *Mahalath* (Psalm 53, 81) may refer to the tune used or that the psalm was sung during sickness.
  - *Shiggaion* (Psalm 7 and Habbakuk 3:1) may indicate strong emotion.
  - *Alamoth* (Psalm 46) may be a choir of ladies, perhaps singing falsetto.
  - The musical instruments to be used are listed in Psalm 4, 5, 6, 55, 61, 67, and 76.
  - *Gittith* (Psalm 8, 81, 84) refers to a stringed instrument like a harp.
  - *Sheminith* (Psalm 12 title) may refer to an 8-stringed instrument or that the psalm is to be sung down an octave.
  - *Maskil* (Psalm 32, 42, 44, 45, 52, 53, 54, 55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142) refers to a poem or song of contemplation.
  - *Miktam* (Psalm 16, 56, 58, 59) may refer to percussive or wind instruments used to accompany the psalm.
  - Some psalms are labelled as prayers, songs, petitions, thanksgivings, praises or psalms.
- Psalm 30 was written for the dedication of the Temple.
- The situation to which the Psalm refers is given for Psalm 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 102 and 142.

Each of the psalms reflects their writer's relationship with God in their situation and circumstances at the time. In some the psalmist cries out to God during a time of trial while in others they seek His intervention in their (or others) lives. Sometimes the psalmist focuses on God's blessings or curses, and at other times he sings His praises and thanks Him for what He has done. Together the psalms give a wonderful insight into the relationship between God and His people.

## Themes

The psalms are mostly independent of each other so it is hard to identify themes as you read consecutively through the Book of Psalms. Many psalms, however, deal with the same kind of material and it is here that the major themes emerge.

While the psalms were written devotionally rather than as teaching we can learn much about God from them.

- **God is one.** Psalms 115:3-8; 135:15-18; 139.
- **God is the Creator.** Psalms 8:3; 19:1-6; 51:10; 86:9; 89:11; 95:3-5,7; 100:3
- **God is sovereign over history.** Psalms 44; 78; 80; 81; 105; 106
- **God is sovereign over nature.** Psalms 18:7; 19:1-6; 65:8-13; 105:26-42; 135:5-7
- **God is holy.** Psalms 11:4, 22:3; 47:8
- **God is righteous.** Psalms 51:4, 96:13
- **God is love.** Psalms 33:4-6; 36:5-10; 47:4; 78:68; 87:2; 89:1,2,24,28,33-34; 103:17,18; 106:45; 145:4-13.
- **God provides the way of salvation from sin.** Psalm 26:6,7; 103:4;10-12; 130.
- **God judges people and nations.** Psalms 9:8; 10:17,18; 50:3-6; 51:4; 96:13.
- **God chooses.** Psalms 47:9; 105:6,9; 33:12; 105:6,10; 106:51.
- **God loves to bless His people.** Psalm 71:2; 103:6.
- **God is worthy of our praise.** (Most of the psalms!).

The psalms also show us a lot about human beings.

- There is a vast gulf between human beings and God (Psalms 2:1-6; 8:3-4; 10:1; 22:1; 145:3-4) and between the wicked and the righteous. (Psalms 1; 7:14-17; 12; 140; 141)

- Human beings have many limitations (Psalm 90:9-10), but have a responsibility towards all other created beings (Psalm 8:5-8).
- Our relationship with a righteous God is endangered by sin (Psalm 106), but God is gracious and long-suffering (Psalm 103), merciful, faithful and forgiving (Psalm 51, 130; 136; 142).
- We can choose to obey or disobey God. Either way we reap what we sow. (Psalm 1).
- If we have a strong personal relationship with God it shows in our actions and attitudes. (Psalms 15; 24:3-5; 19:7-11; 119)
- Ultimately all people and nations must acknowledge and bow down before the Lord. (Psalms 9:11; 47:1-2, 7-9; 66:8; 67; and 117:1).

## Ways of grouping the Psalms

The Psalms don't follow each other in any particular order. While it is wonderful to read consecutively from Psalm 1 to Psalm 150 it is even more useful to group similar psalms and then look for commonalities or similar ideas or messages.

Here are some of the ways that the Psalms can be grouped:

### 1. Psalms grouped according to the Torah

The original compilers of the Book of Psalms divided it into five sections, each closing with a doxology or benediction. These divisions reflect the five sections in the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.



#### **Book 1: The Genesis Book - Psalms 1–41. Doxology: Psalm 41:13.**

Genesis starts with God separating light and darkness, then begins to describe the history of two seeds: the seed of light through the Lord Jesus Christ, and the seed of darkness through Adam and Eve. Psalm 1 reflects this by comparing the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked. Psalm 22 looks forward to when God will deal with our sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus while Psalm 41 ends in a similar way to Genesis with God's triumphant deliverance. This reflects the deliverance that took place for the children of Israel through Joseph.

#### **Book 2: The Exodus Book - Psalms 42–72. Doxology: Psalm 72:18,19.**

Psalm 42 reflects the cries of God's people in Exodus, while under bondage to Pharaoh. The Psalms in the rest of this section demonstrate the wonderful deliverance that God wrought through Moses, and how God's glory came upon His people as they walked in relationship with Him. Psalm 72 forms a fitting close to the section as it highlights the fulfillment of God's purposes among His people, and His reign over them.

#### **Book 3: The Leviticus Book - Psalms 73–89. Doxology: Psalm 89:52.**

The Hebrew for Leviticus is ויקרא, *Vayikra* which means "he called". Leviticus describes how God called His people out of Egypt and invited them to draw near to Himself (through the Law), Psalm 73 reflects this call for God's people to draw near to Him, and God's invitation to come into His presence. Most of the psalms in this section include references to coming into God's presence in the sanctuary and the section closes in Psalm 89 with a celebration of God's mercies and faithfulness.

#### **Book 4: The Numbers Book - Psalms 90–106. Doxology: Psalm 106:48.**

Numbers describes the wilderness experiences of the children of Israel as Moses led them out of Egypt and up to the Promised Land. Psalm 90 opens this section with the prayer of Moses reminding the people that although they lived in a pilgrim's tent the Lord was really their dwelling place forever. The psalms that follow reinforce this with many references to God's long-suffering, tempered by His love, faithfulness and tender mercies. These are contrasted with the peoples' rebellion, disobedience and provocation of God. The final psalm in the section, Psalm 106, gives a detailed account of the journey through the wilderness and the lessons that should have been learned from it.

#### **Book 5: The Deuteronomy Book - Psalms 107–150. Doxology: Psalm 146-150.**

The final section begins in Psalm 107 with a recital of God's dealings with His people, just as Deuteronomy does. Psalm 119 and Deuteronomy 6 then call us back to the word of God which leads, guides and gives us understanding. The "Songs of Ascents" (Psalms 120-134) reflect the call in Deuteronomy for God to be the centre of our worship. (These songs may have been sung as God's people journeyed to the Temple for the

annual feasts). This section closes in Psalm 145, as Deuteronomy does, with a song of a man of God; a man after God's heart. It looks forward to the King who would one day sit on the throne forever, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The doxologies that complete this section (and all of the other sections) give praise to the Lord for His wonderful character, and His gracious acts towards His people.

## 2. Psalms grouped according to prophecy

The original 5-book division can also be interpreted prophetically, showing how God's plan of salvation will be worked out, culminating in the return of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom of God.

**Book 1 (Psalms 1 to 41)** refers to the Passover, the beginning of Israel as a nation, and initial prophecies of the way of salvation which was to be brought in through the life and death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Book 2 (Psalms 42 to 72)** shows the nation of Israel being used by God to bring salvation to all nations through the establishment of the Christian Church.

**Book 3 (Psalm 73 to 89)** describes the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and foreshadows the great tribulation at the time of Jesus' return.

**Book 4 (Psalm 90 to 106)** describes the re-gathering and renewal of Israel after her troubles and foreshadows the events before and during the millennial reign of Christ.

**Book 5 (Psalm 107 to 150)** pictures a time when Israel will be back in relationship with God and foreshadows the New Heavens and the New Earth where all who are in Christ will live with Him for eternity.

## 3. Psalms grouped according to content

When you group psalms by content you look for psalms with similar contexts, messages, or characteristics. This can be very rewarding because the total message from a group of similar psalms is likely to be much greater than of the individual psalms on their own.

Here are some of the main content areas covered by groups of Psalms:

### Psalms of praise

These psalms praise God for His work in creation or in people's lives. They typically begin with a call to praise God, then describe why He is worthy of praise, and end by repeating the call to praise God. The psalms of praise can be:

- Individual praise. In these psalms the psalmist praises God for how He has worked in his life. e.g. Psalms 9, 18, 32, 34, 116 and 138.
- General communal praise. These psalms tend to praise God for some act of deliverance affecting the whole community. They normally refer to Him in the third person, rather than directly. e.g. Psalm 103, 111, 113, 136.
- Specific communal praise. These psalms praise God for a specific community act like deliverance from an enemy or a bountiful harvest. They tend to have been written soon after the event itself. e.g. Psalms 46-48, 66, 67, 124; 129. Over time these psalms have developed a more general usage.
- Praise for God in nature. Many psalms praise God for His creative power in nature e.g. Psalm 8, 19, 29, 50, 65, 102, 104 and 148.
- Praise for God's kingship. *The Lord reigns* is a central part of Psalms 47, 93, and 96–99. The nature of God's reign is described in Psalm 99:4-5.

### Psalms of thanks

In these psalms the psalmist thanks God for His blessings, and encourages others to do so as well. *Give thanks to the Lord for He is good and His love endures forever* (Psalm 107:1). Psalms 75, 105, 106, 107, 118 and 136 are all psalms of thanks.

## Psalms of Zion

Zion is a mountain on the outskirts of Jerusalem where David conquered a Jebusite fortress. The mountain became known as the “City of David”, and became a symbol for the city of Jerusalem. Psalms praising Zion are actually praising the Lord who was considered to live in Zion. Psalms 78:68-72; 132:11-13. These psalms became known as *the songs of Zion*. Psalm 137:3. Examples of Psalms of Zion are Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122 and there are sections about Zion in Psalms 102:16; 125:1; 126:1-3; 133:3, and 147:2. The New Testament concept of a heavenly Jerusalem may have originated from these psalms, especially from Psalm 87.

## Psalms of vengeance

Psalms 5, 6, 11, 12, 35, 37, 38, 40, 52, 54, 56, 58, 69, 83, 109, 129, 137, 139 and 143 all have sections where there is a plea for judgment on the wicked, or on those considered the enemies of God. Sometimes the wording is quite vengeful and seemingly “un-Christian” making it difficult to know how we should approach the psalms of vengeance.

While it is true that vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19), and that the kind of attitude demonstrated here towards others is far from what Jesus taught (Mark 12:30,31, John 13:34, Matthew 5:38-48; Colossians 3:13), these psalms are probably motivated by a belief that God’s honor was at stake. Many of the approaches used would not be appropriate for Christians (e.g. *God please zap them!*), but we need to remember that in pre-Christian times the triumph of enemies or of wickedness was seen as a direct slur on the character, nature and power of God. If God’s enemies triumphed it didn’t reflect very well on Him or on the truths that He espoused. It also helps to remember that the psalms are written in poetic language that makes frequent use of exaggeration.

Perhaps the psalms of vengeance were not written so much to stir God to action, as to stir up a sense of outrage in His people?

## Psalms of repentance

Psalms 6, 13, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143 are examples of psalms where the writer (normally David) confesses their sin, and the guilt and remorse that follow from it. Often these psalms include a description of the distress the writers were experiencing as a result of their sin. This admission is equivalent to an acknowledgment of guilt because in those days distress was seen as God’s judgment for sin. After confessing their sin the writers tend to prostrate themselves before God and seek His mercy (rather than dealing with the sin through the sacrificial system). David seemed to need to repent quite regularly! These psalms show the depth of his despair because of sin, and of his desire to live in right relationship with God. Yet he continued to fall. How blessed we are today to have our sins forgiven and forgotten through the “one for all” sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.



## Psalms of trust

In these psalms the writers declare their supreme trust in God. Typically they begin with gratitude to God for His trustworthiness and a declaration of ongoing trust in God. Examples of psalms of trust are Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27, 55, 56, 57, 62, 86, 116, 131 and 138.

## Psalms of wisdom

The psalms are wisdom literature, so most psalms contain elements in which the wisdom of the writers is passed on for succeeding generations. Some psalms, however, are specially written to pass on wisdom. Examples are Psalms 1, 8, 16, 21, 22, 111, 127, 128 and 133.

## Historical psalms

These psalms recount the history of Israel and often include lessons learned from the history they are recounting. The major historical psalms are Psalm 78, describing the period from the exodus to the establishment of the David as King; Psalm 105, covering the period from Abraham to the conquest of Canaan; Psalm 106, covering the period from Egypt to the judges; and Psalm 136, covering the period from Creation to entry into the Promised Land.

## Laments

In many of the psalms the writer laments some aspect of what is happening in the nation, or in their community or personal life. Typically in these psalms the psalmist:

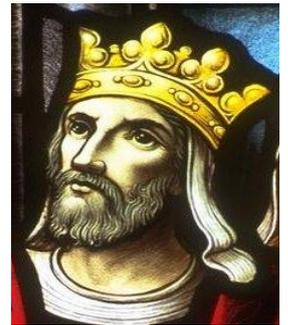
- recognises God is the only one who can sort out the situation.
- describes the distress being experienced.
- curses the one responsible for their suffering.
- protests their innocence or admits their guilt.
- ask Gods for His help.
- professes faith that God has heard their petition and that He will act.
- thanks or praises God for His help.

Examples of national laments are Psalms 12, 14, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 106, 125, 137.

Examples of personal laments are Psalm 3, 4, 6, 13, 17, 22, 25, 27, 28, 31, 38, 41, 43, 56, 57, 70, 102, 109, 120, 130, 143.

## Royal psalms

Royal psalms are psalms written for or about the King. Although none mention the King by name the king they refer to is King David. The royal psalms deal with the king's coronation, marriage, battles and relationship with God, and often assume that the Lord reigns, as well as the King. e.g *Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever.* Psalm 45:6. Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 61, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132 and 144 are usually classified as royal psalms.



## Messianic psalms

The Jews considered some psalms referred to the coming Messiah. e.g. Psalms 16, 22, 40, 69, 72, 102, 109, 118, 132. Many of these psalms were later quoted by the early church to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. (Luke 24:44):

- Psalm 2 is quoted in Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5.
- Psalm 45 is quoted in Hebrews 1:8-9 and later in Hebrews 1 is linked with other quotes about God from Psalm 97:7 and 102:25-27.
- Psalm 110 is the most frequently quoted messianic psalm. See Matthew 22:43-45; Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 1:13; 5:5-10; 6:20; 7:21.
- Psalm 8 is quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:27.
- Psalm 40 is quoted in Hebrews 10:5-10.

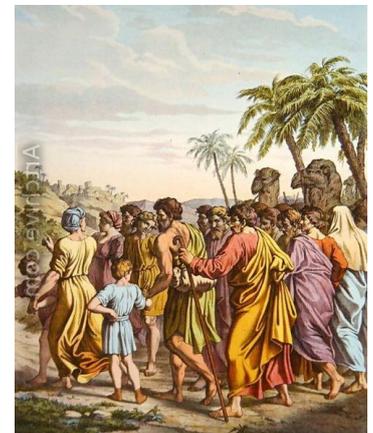
Psalm 22 is the most powerful messianic psalm as it relates directly to what happened when Jesus was on the cross.



## 4. Pilgrim Psalms

The Songs of Ascents or Degrees (Psalm 120 – 134) are called pilgrim psalms because they were probably chanted by the Children of Israel as they came out of captivity in Babylon on their return to Zion, and then as they walked to Jerusalem to attend the three pilgrim feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). Deuteronomy 16:16. The songs may have also been chanted by the priests as they ascended the 15 steps to minister at the temple in Jerusalem.

Each psalm is labelled "A song of ascents" in its title. Four of the songs were written by David (122,124,131,133); one by Solomon (127), and the rest are anonymous.



## The Songs of Ascents

In his book "Fifteen steps out" Bob Mumford relates the Songs of Ascents to stages in the development of our Christian lives. The songs illustrate how we come out of the confusion of our hearts to a place where we can understand and fulfill God's purpose for our lives. The "15 steps out" are:

- **Psalm 120. Seeing God in things present.**

We are in distress because we don't see God doing what we expect Him to do.

- **Psalm 121. Learning where to get our answers.**

We recognize that the only place we can get help is from the Lord. We know He is watching over us in our present circumstances, and will watch over us in the future.

- **Psalm 122. Recognition of God's objectives.**

We need to align ourselves with what God is doing. He is building His spiritual house and we are to be part of that move of God. 1 Peter 2:4-6.

- **Psalm 123. Learning to wait.**

We need to learn to wait on God until He shows us His will. This is where we develop patience, and grow in our dependence on God.

- **Psalm 124. Translating doctrine into experience.**

We begin to trust God for every aspect of our lives. As we act in obedience to Him we find He comes through for us and helps us, We know that without Him we are helpless.

- **Psalm 125. Becoming established in God.**

Our trust in God becomes established. We choose to do what's right so we won't be shaken by anything life throws at us.

- **Psalm 126. The turning of the tide.**

We recognize that God has done great things for us, and are filled with joy. We want to share this with others. Our focus changes from being blessed ourselves, to being a blessing to others.

- **Psalm 127. Being useful.**

We move from a religious approach (where we struggle and strive, but ultimately labour in vain) to allowing the Lord do His work in and through us. From this intimate relationship with the Lord we begin to be spiritually fruitful.

- **Psalm 128. Becoming mature.**

We walk in God's ways and so know God's blessing in every part of our lives, including in our work, marriage and family.

- **Psalm 129. Embracing suffering.**

We may still experience suffering, but because we know the Lord is with us the suffering helps us to grow. Even though we are suffering we can still be a blessing to others.

- **Psalm 130. Understanding ourselves.**

We recognize who we really are, and that we are totally dependent on the Lord. Our hope is now fully in the Lord.

- **Psalm 131. Finding our true place in the Body of Christ.**

In knowing ourselves we are content with wherever the Lord places us.

- **Psalm 132. Union with the Lord.**

The Lord is our priority. The Lord knows us and we know Him.

- **Psalm 133. Union with others.**

We are one with others who are in a similar relationship with the Lord, and corporately we experience a greater blessing.

- **Psalm 134. Praise the Lord.**

We praise the Lord together, because He has blessed us all so much.

## 5. Acrostic Psalms

These are psalms that are structured around the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. One verse starts with an A (א aleph), the next B (ב bet) and so on. Psalm 119 is well known as an acrostic psalm because each section of 8 verses is headed by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The first 8 verses all start with aleph, the next 8 with bet and so on.

The following psalms are written in acrostic format: 9, 10, 37 (2 verses for each letter); 25, 34, 145 (1 verse for each letter); 111, 112 (½ verse for each letter). 119 (8 verses for each letter). When the psalms are translated into English we lose the acrostics.

## Conclusion

The Psalms express the wisdom and worship of kings, priests, wise men and prophets from long ago, but the truths they express are timeless. People with a heart after God from the times of ancient Israel right through to today have been able to find something in the psalms that expresses their own heart's conditions, desires, and devotion. Modern life is vastly different from that of ancient Israel, but God remains unchanged and so do the basic needs of the human heart. The Holy Spirit, therefore, can still use this spiritual treasury as a means of revelation and communication between God and man. Few books in the Bible have exercised so profound an influence or been so widely used. The Psalms truly provide a rich resource for our devotional lives.

## Discussion questions

- What is a psalm? Who wrote most of the psalms in the Book of Psalms? Why were the psalms written? How were the writers of the psalms influenced by the culture of the time they were written? How relevant are they for life today?
- Psalms are considered to be “wisdom literature”. What is wisdom literature? What other books in the Bible are classified as wisdom literature? How does their being wisdom literature influence the way we interpret the psalms as part of the Bible and as revelations of God's word?
- Are the psalms in The Book of Psalms to be considered as God's words or the words of their writers? How does this influence the authority that psalms have in the Bible? How should we interpret the psalms to gain maximum benefit from the wisdom they contain?
- *Take a psalm* (Psalm 81:2, KJV). Choose a psalm and describe who wrote it; why it was written; the background circumstances relating to it; and the major messages contained in it.
- There are many themes in the Book of Psalms including wisdom, trust in the Lord, thankfulness, vengeance, the coming Messiah, the fear of the Lord, repentance, praise of God, the wicked and the righteous ..... Choose one of these themes and identify all psalms related to the theme. Then collate the teaching that comes from the full set of psalms on the theme. What important principles emerge? What do you learn about the theme that is relevant for your life today?
- What have you learned from your study of the Book of Psalms? How will you apply this in your life in future?