Singing in the Dark

A 12-Week Journey Through the Psalms · Epiphany Seattle

What Are the Psalms?

- **150 poems** gathered over roughly 900 years (1000–100 BCE).
- **Five books** organized to echo the five books of Moses.
- **Psalmoi** Greek: songs sung to a stringed instrument.
- **Tehillim** Hebrew: "praises" — though more than a third are laments. That gap is a theological statement.

The Five Books

- **Book I (1–41)** Mostly David. Personal crisis. One voice, one soul.
- **Book II (42–72)** Sons of Korah and Asaph alongside David.
- **Book III (73–89)** The darkest book. Exile, abandonment, the covenant under strain.
- **Book IV (90–106)** Theological response to exile. God still reigns when kingdoms fall.
- **Book V (107–150)** Praise ascending. Psalms of Ascent. Five consecutive closing praise psalms.

Each book closes with a doxology — blessing is always the last word.

Why Five Books?

- **Liturgical use:** Temple, synagogue, pilgrimage — each shaped a distinct collection.
- **Editorial theology:** Five books of prayer mirror the Torah. Torah speaks down; the Psalter speaks back.
- **Narrative arc:** Individual crisis (I) to communal catastrophe (III) to cosmic praise (V). Lament gives way, slowly, to adoration.

The Authors

- **David** ~73 psalms. King, warrior, exile, adulterer, penitent. His life was wide enough to generate every kind of prayer.
- **Asaph** Temple musician. His psalms wrestle with injustice and divine silence.
- **Sons of Korah** Descended from the rebel Korah. Their psalms burn with longing for God's presence.
- **Moses** One psalm only — Psalm 90, the oldest in the Psalter.
- **Solomon** Psalm 72 and Psalm 127. Wisdom, not war.
- **Anonymous** A significant portion. These prayers belong to everyone.

Types of Psalms

- **Praise & Worship** Adoration of who God is — not what God has done, but who God is.
- **Lament** The single largest category — more than a third of all 150. Complaint directed at God is not faithlessness. It is prayer.
- **Thanksgiving** Response to something specific God has done. More personal than praise.
- **Messianic & Royal** Centered on the Davidic king. The early church read these as pointing to Christ.
- **Wisdom** The good life, the fear of the Lord. Close in spirit to Proverbs and Job.
- **Historical Recitation** Retelling Israel's story as an act of communal memory and identity.

Hebrew Poetry — Parallelism

Hebrew poetry does not rhyme — it thinks in pairs. Two lines that echo, deepen, or contrast each other.

- **Synonymous:** "The LORD is my shepherd / I shall not want." Line 2 echoes line 1 in different words.
- **Synthetic:** "I lift my eyes to the hills / From where does my help come?" Line 2 extends and deepens line 1.
- **Antithetic:** "The LORD watches over the way of the righteous / but the way of the wicked will perish." Line 2 contrasts line 1.

Read slowly. Read aloud when you can. The rocking quality is the point.

Living Practice — Three Thousand Years

- **The Temple (~950 BCE)** Levitical choirs at morning and evening sacrifice. The sound of a whole people before God.
- **The Synagogue (70 CE)** Rome destroys the Temple. Without it, the words themselves become the offering.
- **The Monastery (3rd–16th c.)** Desert Fathers memorized all 150. Benedict's Rule: all 150 every week in eight daily offices — the Opus Dei.
- **The Daily Office (Cranmer to now)** All 150 every 30 days. That practice continues at Epiphany — Morning Prayer, five days a week.

"Whoever reads the Psalms feels they are his own words, not another's." — Athanasius, c. 360 CE

Jesus and the Psalms

Session 1 Orientation · Singing in the Dark

Jesus Praying the Psalms

These were not proof texts he reached for in a crisis. They were his prayer book — learned in childhood, sung at Passover, on his lips at the last.

- **Psalm 22 from the cross:** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Not despair — the opening of a psalm that moves from abandonment to praise. He was praying it all the way through.
- **Psalm 31 at his death:** "Into your hands I commend my spirit." A bedtime prayer Jewish children learned young. Trust at the very end.
- **Psalms 113–118 at the Last Supper:** The Hallel, sung at every Passover. The last thing Jesus sang before his arrest was almost certainly Psalm 118: "This is the day the LORD has made."

The New Testament as Psalms Commentary

The early church read the Psalms as a double text — David praying his own life, but the words running deeper than David knew.

- **Psalm 16** Resurrection. Peter in Acts 2: "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol." David wrote it — but David's tomb is right here. It must point to someone else.
- **Psalm 110** "The LORD said to my Lord: sit at my right hand." The most quoted psalm in the entire New Testament.
- **Psalm 69** The Crucifixion. "Zeal for your house has consumed me" (John 2). "They gave me vinegar to drink" (John 19).
- **Psalm 118** Palm Sunday. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD." The stone the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone.

The 12-Session Arc

Creation to praise — with everything honest in between.

Oct. 9 **Psalm 104** *Creation*
Oct. 16 **Psalm 78** *Religious Tradition*
Oct. 23 **Psalm 121** *Pilgrimage*
Oct. 30 **Psalm 22** *Jesus*
Nov. 6 **Psalm 90** *Death*
Nov. 13 **Psalm 88** *Desolation*
Nov. 20 **Psalm 137** *Wrath*
Dec. 4 **Psalm 51** *Penitence*
Dec. 11 **Psalm 126** *Joy*
Dec. 18 **Psalm 103** *Adoration*
Jan. 8 **Psalm 150** *Worship*

For Further Reading

- **Walter Brueggemann** The Message of the Psalms (Augsburg, 1984)
- **C.S. Lewis** Reflections on the Psalms (Harcourt, 1958)
- **Athanasius** Letter to Marcellinus (c. 360 CE)

A Word to Take Home

"Whatever season you find yourself in, there is a psalm for it."

Next session: Psalm 104 | Creation | October 9