The Psalms

Singing in the Dark

a 12 week journey through the Psalms

The oldest prayer book still in continuous daily use in the West.

And still honest.

The Rigveda predates the Psalms by centuries — but the Psalms are still prayed daily in synagogues, monasteries, and churches around the world. Morning prayer, evening prayer, every day.

150
poems gathered over ~900 years (1000–100 BCE)

5
books, echoing the five books of Moses

Psalmoi
Greek: songs sung to a stringed instrument

Tehillim
Hebrew: "praises" — though more than a third are laments

The Psalms as Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew poetry doesn't rhyme — it thinks in pairs. Two lines that echo, deepen, or push against each other.

Synonymous

The second line echoes the first in different words. Same idea, new angle — meaning deepens with each pass.

The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

Psalm 23:1

The second line unpacks what it means to have God as shepherd. It doesn't add new information — it lets the first line land.

Synthetic

The second line extends or deepens the first — completing a thought, opening a question, pushing the idea further.

I lift my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

Psalm 121:1

The first line sets a scene; the second turns it into a question. The psalm then spends the rest answering it.

Antithetic

The second line contrasts the first. Light and shadow placed side by side — the contrast is itself the meaning.

The LORD watches over the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 1:6

Psalm 1 is built almost entirely on this structure. The contrast isn't cruel — it's clarifying.

Read slowly. Read aloud when you can. The rocking quality is the point — meaning deepens with each pass.

The Authors of the Psalms

David

King, warrior, musician

Psalms 3–41, 51–72, 108–110, 138–145

The dominant voice of the Psalter. Shepherd boy, giant-killer, adulterer, exile, king. His life was wide enough to generate every kind of prayer.

Asaph

Temple musician and prophet

Psalms 50, 73–83

Appointed by David to lead worship. His psalms wrestle hard with injustice and divine silence — a theologian who prayed with his fists.

Sons of Korah

Guild of Levitical singers

Psalms 42–49, 84–85, 87–88

Descendants of the rebel Korah, who survived when their father did not. Their psalms burn with longing for the presence of God.

Moses

Prophet, lawgiver, liberator

Psalm 90 only

The oldest psalm in the Psalter. Moses meditates on human brevity against divine eternity — written, tradition says, in the wilderness.

Solomon

King, sage, builder of the Temple

Psalms 72, 127

Two psalms: one a prayer for a just king, one a quiet word about the limits of human striving. Wisdom, not war.

Anonymous

Unknown voices across the centuries

Psalms 1, 2, 91–106, 111–117, and others

A significant portion of the Psalter has no name attached. These prayers belong to everyone — which may be exactly the point.

The Five Books of the Psalms

Book I	Book II	Book III	Book IV	Book V
Psalms 1–41	**Psalms 42–72**	**Psalms 73–89**	**Psalms 90–106**	**Psalms 107–150**
Personal laments, mostly David. One voice, one soul, before God.	*A broader community: Sons of Korah, Asaph, David alongside each other.*	*The darkest book. Exile, abandonment, the covenant under strain.*	*Theological response to exile. God still reigns when kingdoms fall.*	*Praise ascending. The Psalter ends in a crescendo it had to earn.*

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

Why Five Books?

Liturgical Use

Different collections were likely used in different worship contexts — temple, synagogue, pilgrimage. The books reflect those distinct origins before being gathered into one volume.

Editorial Theology

The five-book structure mirrors the Torah deliberately. Just as Moses gave Israel five books of law, the Psalter gives Israel five books of prayer and praise — the human voice answering the divine word.

Narrative Arc

Read as a whole, the five books trace a movement from individual crisis (Book I) through communal catastrophe (Book III) to cosmic praise (Book V). Lament gives way, slowly and honestly, to adoration.

Each book closes with a doxology — a short burst of praise regardless of what surrounds it. Whatever you've just prayed through, blessing is still the last word.

Types of Psalms

Praise & Worship *Celebrating who God is — pure adoration of God's nature and character.*	8, 29, 33, 95–100, 113, 117, 145–150
Lament *Honest complaint and grief brought directly to God. The largest category — more than a third of all 150.*	3, 13, 22, 42, 51, 88, 130, 137, and more
Thanksgiving *Recounting something specific God has done — usually deliverance from a particular crisis.*	18, 30, 32, 34, 66, 107, 116, 118, 138
Messianic & Royal *Centered on the Davidic king or a future anointed one. The early church read these as pointing to Christ.*	2, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 110, 132
Wisdom *Reflecting on the good life, the righteous and the wicked, the fear of the Lord. Close in spirit to Proverbs.*	1, 19, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128
Historical Recitation *Retelling Israel's story — exodus, wilderness, covenant — as an act of communal memory and identity.*	78, 105, 106, 135, 136

The Psalms as Living Practice

The same poems. Three thousand years. Still in daily use.

~950 BCE

The Temple

Levitical choirs sang the Psalms at morning and evening sacrifice, at festivals and coronations. They were not private devotion — they were the sound of a whole people before God.

70 CE onward

The Synagogue

When Rome destroyed the Temple, the sacrifice ended — but the Psalms survived. Without a Temple, the words became the offering. Judaism carried the Psalms into exile and they carried Judaism back.

3rd–16th century

The Monastery

Benedict's Rule assigned all 150 across the week in eight daily offices — the Opus Dei. Some Desert Fathers memorized all 150 and prayed them daily. The goal: the Psalms become your native emotional language.

Cranmer to now

The Daily Office

Thomas Cranmer built the Anglican Daily Office on Benedict's template — all 150 every thirty days, morning and evening prayer. That practice continues today in monasteries, cathedrals, and parishes around the world.

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

The Cross

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

His first word from the cross. Not despair — but the opening of a psalm he knew by heart, one that moves from abandonment to vindication. He was praying it all the way through.

Psalm 31

His Death

"Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Luke records these as his final words. A bedtime prayer Jewish children learned young. Jesus died with the words of a child's prayer — trust at the very end.

Psalms 113–118

The Last Supper

The Hallel — sung at every Passover.

Matthew and Mark say Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before Gethsemane. That hymn was the Hallel. 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 reached back to the Psalms to explain who Jesus was. David was praying his own life — but the words ran deeper than David knew.

Psalm 16
Resurrection

"You will not abandon my soul to Sheol." Peter quotes this in Acts 2 as the founding proof text of the resurrection. David wrote it — but David's tomb is right here, Peter argues. It must point to someone else.

Psalm 110
Identity & Reign

"The LORD said to my Lord: sit at my right hand." The most quoted psalm in the entire New Testament. Jesus raises it himself in the temple as a riddle about his own identity. The early church read it as his coronation text.

Psalm 69
The Crucifixion

"Zeal for your house has consumed me." "They gave me vinegar to drink." John quotes both at the crucifixion — the psalm's suffering read as a portrait of Jesus painted centuries before.

Psalm 118
Entry into Jerusalem

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD." The crowd's cry on Palm Sunday. The stone the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone. Jesus quotes it directly as a word about himself.

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