

How to Read the Psalms

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Preacher: Jerry Shepherd

[0 : 00] It is truly good to be back with you again. I was here a couple of years ago and I think preached a couple of messages during the summer. And that was a great time.

And I really appreciated the saints who worship here at that point. And then got to preach a couple of times last summer online.

And that wasn't so good. I didn't get to see your lovely faces. But it was good for you because you didn't see my face. No, I'm sorry. You did actually. Yeah, I'm sorry.

That didn't work out right. But anyway, it's good to be here. And I do pray that Pastor Kent will have a good time away. And I'm very proud of Kent.

I knew him even before he went to seminary back in the days when we both attended West Meadows, back in the 90s. And he's a good man. Just remember that whenever Pastor Kent preaches, if he says anything good that you really like and agree with, that's my fault.

[1 : 08] Okay? I taught him well. And if he says something that you don't like and don't agree with, well, he wasn't listening that day. That's what happened there. Anyway, it's good to be with you.

And I was wondering what I would actually do for this. He asked me to preach four times, twice this month and twice next month. And so what I'm going to end up doing here is both preaching and doing almost some seminary lecturing.

In fact, after the second sermon next Sunday, I'm going to give you some homework to do to prepare for what we look at in August. But we are going to be looking in these four times that I'm with you at the book of Psalms.

Not at any one particular psalm as such, though we will focus somewhat on some of the psalms. But the whole idea here is getting a kind of an introduction to the psalms.

So as it's mentioned out on the sign there on the lawn, the first message will have to do with how to read the psalms.

[2 : 18] And then next Sunday, we'll go from there into how to pray the psalms. And that's where I'll give you some homework to do.

And then when I come back here in August for two more Sundays, we'll go from how to pray the psalms to how to cry the psalms.

The psalms are good psalms of lament and helping us to understand how to cry out to the Lord. And then also part of the reason why we have the word of God given to us is that we might know how to live as Christians and to live as a church community.

And so the psalms speak into that as well. So the fourth message will be how to live the psalms. And in that particular message, we will focus on one psalm.

Psalms 119. You can prepare ahead of time by memorizing that psalm. It has 176 verses. So, boy, I almost think I should give a prize to someone who can do that.

[3 : 28] So, anyway, we're going to start with this morning how to read the psalms. And we're going to be looking at psalms 1 and 2 this morning.

So if you have a Bible with you and can access it, let me ask you to turn to psalms 1 and 2. And also let me just mention that we're going to be looking at those two psalms in the context of the entire morning.

So if you have a Bible and can open it there for the reading, that's great. But also it'd be good if you left it open as well. Don't close it after we read it. It's also, before we get into reading the two psalms this morning, I also just want to mention why the psalms are important for us.

They are not simply cute little ditties that someone decided to put into the Bible. These are not the top ten charts of the 1000 BC times.

But they are very important for the people of God and they're important for us today. First of all, the psalms are important because they show us who God is.

[4 : 43] The psalms are about God. And there are two main lessons we learn about God in the psalms. And interestingly, those two lessons are lessons that you probably learned a long time ago when you were a kid.

Lesson number one, God is great. Lesson number two, God is good. So remember when you were learning how to say grace at the table?

God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. That was good theology you learned back then. And the psalms reinforced that by saying that God is great and God is good.

Those are two very important lessons to learn because there are a whole bunch of books out there that will deny one or the other of those statements.

You may remember, I think it was back in the late 80s, early 90s, there was a rabbi. His name was Harold Kushner. And he wrote a book entitled, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?*

[5 : 45] And he said there are two possibilities. At the end of the day, he said there are two possibilities. Either God is great and he could prevent all those horrible things from happening to us.

Or God is good but not great and he can't keep all those horrible things from happening to us. So in the end, he opted to say God is good but he's not great.

He's not all powerful. But the psalms say he is both. He is all powerful and he is all loving. He is great and he is good.

Secondly, the psalms show us who we are. John Calvin, whose birthday was yesterday, by the way. He's now like about 500 years old.

But John Calvin wrote a commentary on the psalms. And in the preface of that commentary, he said, The psalms are an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.

[6 : 51] That is, the psalms teach us about ourselves. The psalms teach us that we are sinful. The psalms teach us about our hopes and our desires and what we are like.

So the psalms describe God, but the psalms also describe us. And they show us what the world is. Basically, the psalms, in addition to the rest of the Bible, says there are two kinds of people.

There are those who love God and those who don't. There are the righteous and the wicked. Or as Augustine, the fourth century church father said, There are two cities, the city of man and the city of God.

And he wrote an entire huge volume to encourage people to belong to the city of God. And then the psalms teach us how to praise.

Now, we might think that we know how to praise pretty well. But the psalms teach us how to praise. And in fact, there's an old hymn.

[8 : 06] I believe it was written by Isaac Watts. And one of the lines in that hymn is, My gracious master and my God, assist me to proclaim.

We need God's assistance in even being able to praise him. As I've already said, and I won't belabor this, the psalms teach us how to live.

The psalms teach us how to pray. The psalms teach us how to be honest before God. To pour out our hearts to him. And not try in any way to deceive him or make him think we're better than we are.

Or even worse than we are. But just to be honest before him. The psalms teach us honesty. And then, one very important part, and I'll get into this in August.

The psalms teach us how to complain. Now, you might be thinking, and I think the same thing every time I say that, I've got a pretty good handle on that already.

[9 : 13] I know how to complain already. But maybe no, I don't. Because think about this.

Remember when the Israelites wandered through the wilderness? And every once in a while, they complained and murmured.

And what did God do? Well, on several occasions, he nuked them. He did something to them. He punished them. He killed many of them. And in fact, that entire first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt to go to the promised land, almost that entire first generation didn't make it because of all their complainings and murmurings.

And yet, when we come to the psalms, and we're going to learn this in about a month from now, the psalms are full of complaints. People crying out to God because of how they hurt.

And even saying, oh Lord, where is your great love that you promised? Where are the answers to prayer that you promised to give us? And God doesn't nuke them.

He doesn't punish them. He doesn't castigate them for praying that way. So maybe there is a right way and a wrong way to complain.

[10:29] And the psalms teach us the right way. We'll get into that a little bit later on. Okay, so for right now, let us go ahead and read Psalms 1 and 2.

And I'll just read the two psalms together. And then those words you were looking for, brother, after I read it, I will say, this is the word of the Lord.

And then you will say, thanks be to God at the end. All right, here we go. Psalm 1. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

[11:51] For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. And then Psalm 2. Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters. The one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them.

Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord. He said to me, You are my son. Today I have become your father.

[12:51] Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter.

You will dash them to pieces like pottery. Therefore, you kings, be wise. Be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the son, lest he be angry, and you be destroyed in your way. For his wrath can flare up in a moment.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him. This is the word of the Lord. All right, I love to hear that. That's great.

We need to become more liturgical, right? So there we go. All right. So first of all, I'm going to just spend a little bit of time explaining these two Psalms and what's in the content, and then we'll shift directions toward how to read them.

[13:57] So first of all, with Psalm 1, you'll notice that one of the prevalent things in this song is the Torah. It's all about the law of the Lord. The person is blessed who meditates in the law of the Lord, who walks in it.

The person is not blessed who obeys other kinds of counsel, who seeks counsel from the wicked, or from the mockers, or from the scorners, or those who are opposed to the law of the Lord.

But the psalmist says, if you want to prosper in this life, and I don't think he's talking about material prosperity, though I think in some cases that may well apply as well.

Those who are more righteous will tend to be more prosperous and more diligent in their work. But the prosperity that he's looking at here is a prosperity that enables a good relationship with the Lord. It's a spiritual prosperity. And the psalmist says, Blessed are those who meditate in the law of the Lord day and night, who make the Lord their priority.

[15:12] In the end, the Lord will watch over their way. He will prosper them. He will preserve their life. But those who were opposed to the Lord, and opposed to instruction, and opposed to his teaching, they will perish.

The Lord will not watch over their way. They will end up losing their lives because of their failure to follow the Lord. So that's the basic content of Psalm 1.

And there's that theme again. There's the righteous versus the wicked. The city of God versus the city of man. Those who love the Lord versus those who don't.

Those who obey the law of the Lord, as opposed to those who don't obey it. Now, I want to show you one very interesting thing about Psalm 1, and then we'll go on to Psalm 2.

Look again where it says in verse 1, Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.

[16:23] Now, pay attention to those verbs. Does not walk, does not stand, does not sit. And then you have three describing phrases.

Doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked. Doesn't stand in the way of sinners. Doesn't sit in the seat of mockers. Instead, this person delights in the law of the Lord, and he meditates on it day and night.

Now, let me read a passage to you from Deuteronomy chapter 6. You don't have to turn there. Just listen to it. Keep your place here in Psalm 1. Don't want you to do walk all over the place.

But just listen to this pattern. It's very familiar, but there's a couple of verses there that I think are important for even understanding Psalm 1. This comes from Deuteronomy 6. It's called the Shema in Judaism.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

[17:31] But then there are a couple of verses that follow those very famous verses that maybe we haven't given the same attention to. Listen to this.

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. And then catch this verse. Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 7. Impress them on your children.

Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up or when you stand.

Notice those verbs. Walk, sit, lie down and get up or stand. Those same verbs appear in Psalm 1.1. Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

[18:34] Instead, they meditate on the law of the Lord. And what does the law of the Lord tell you to do? It tells you to meditate on the law when you sit at home, when you walk along the road and when you rise, when you stand up.

Now, let me ask you a question. Did you ever notice that connection before? Did you ever see that connection between Psalm 1.1 and Deuteronomy 6.7?

Walk, stand, sit. Well, when I was in seminary, I had a professor who was teaching us a class on how to interpret scripture. And he did the same thing that I just did now for you.

And he asked us that question. He said, have you ever noticed that before? And none of us had. And then he said, do you know why you didn't notice it before?

Let me tell you why. Because you haven't been meditating in the law of the Lord. Or you would have seen that. Well, in some ways, the way this psalm is laid out reinforces that structure.

[19:41] And the person who loves the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night is bound at some point to notice that connection. While I was in seminary, I didn't notice it then, but I've paid attention to it now.

But anyway, that's the first psalm. Just sort of keep that in your mind here. Or as I tell my students, put that on the back burner. Keep it in mind. And now let's go to the second psalm.

Now the second psalm is, of course, a few verses longer. And it has a kind of a different message here. Psalm 1 was about the word. It was about the Torah.

It was about the law of the Lord. Psalm 2, however, is about the king. So we sort of shift gears in a way. Psalm 1 was the Torah of the Lord.

But now Psalm 2 is about the anointed of the Lord. It starts off by saying the nations are conspiring against the Lord, but they're not just conspiring against the Lord, but they're conspiring against his anointed one.

[20:50] Now, if you have a Bible with you, you may notice here that most English translations will capitalize that phrase at the end of verse 2.

They conspire against his anointed one. Well, by capitalizing it, what they are doing, or the English translations that do that, what they are doing is saying, we think this psalm is prophetic.

It's about Jesus, who is the true anointed one. And I think, to a certain degree, they are certainly right, but in the context of Psalm 2, it is about the person who was anointed then.

And almost certainly, we are to think here of the King of Israel. And in particular, we should be thinking the person of David. I think David is the one who is speaking in this psalm.

And he says, the nations are rising up against you, O Lord, and they're also rising up against your anointed one, that is me, David says, the King of Israel.

[21 : 58] And then, he predicts, he prophesies, that in verse 4, the one who is enthroned in heaven will laugh at them. He will rebuke them in his anger.

He will terrify them in his wrath. And he will do it by making a pronouncement. And the pronouncement is, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.

And then, in verse 7, David, or the king, says this, I will proclaim the decree of the Lord. And what follows then is what the Lord would have decreed, what he would have said, what he would have promised, what he would have delivered to the people of Israel on the day that David was anointed and installed as king.

And here is what the Lord said. David says, he said to me, you are my son. Today, I have become your father.

Now, what that means in the context of the ancient Near East is that on that day, David, the king, is not simply being anointed and installed as king.

[23 : 16] He is being proclaimed to be the son of God. Now, not the literal, physical, genetic son of God, though there were civilizations around Israel that believed their kings were gods, that they were the actual sons of gods.

At one point, there is a king in the ancient Near East who said, the blood of God flows through my veins. Well, that wasn't what they did here in Israel.

God taught them better than that. But David hears God say to him, you are my son. This day, that is your installation day, your anointing day as king, I have become your father.

I have adopted you as my son, as my anointed one. And then he makes him a promise. He says, ask of me. Just ask.

And I will give you the nations for your inheritance. I will make the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule over them with an iron scepter.

[24 : 22] I will give you the power to dash them to pieces like pottery. And then, having said that, then the king or God, we're not quite sure who's saying this in verse 10, gives a warning to all the kings in the area and says, therefore you kings be wise.

You be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, rejoice with trembling, and kiss his son, lest he be angry.

Now, what's behind this is something that we know for sure from the ancient Near East. Some nations ruled over other nations. And evidently, Israel ruled over other nations.

At various points, they were rulers over Philistia and Edom and Moab and maybe some other smaller city-states as well. But whenever a king died, whenever there was a change in the leadership, that was always an occasion for those nations over whom that larger kingdom ruled, that was always a time for them to say, okay, we need to reassess this situation.

Maybe we can rebel against this king, overthrow him, and gain our independence and become a nation in our own right without having to pay him tribute or taxes.

[25 : 49] But the king says this, pay attention. Don't rise up against me. Don't make any kind of conspiracy against me because the Lord has anointed me. He has placed me as king on Zion, his holy hill.

He is working through me. I am his anointed one. Do not rebel against him. Do not rebel against me. Or else you will be terrified in God's wrath.

Kiss the sun. Give me your allegiance so that you do not perish in your way. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

And it's actually ambiguous here. And I think it's maybe even intentionally ambiguous as to who the him is in the last part of verse 12.

Is him the Lord or is him the king? Well, I think it's both. Blessed are all who seek refuge in the Lord, the God of Israel.

[26 : 53] Blessed are those who kiss his son. Give him their allegiance and seek refuge in him. So that's the basic message that's involved in Psalm 2.

Now, the next thing that I want to point out to you, and this is really trying to move toward what I want to get to here with regards to how to read the Psalms.

One of the things that has really come to the forefront of Psalms scholarship and commentaries and Psalm studies in the last, I'd say, 30, 40 years, one of the things that has really come to the front is

the idea that the Psalms are not just a random collection, one Psalm after the other, one, two, three, four, five, et cetera, and that they are just independent compositions that don't really have anything to do with each other.

Rather, what's come to the forefront is the idea that the Psalms are a collection, but they are a purposeful collection. They are an arranged collection.

There is a message even in the arrangement of the Psalms. And you'll get different scholars saying different things about how the Psalms are arranged.

[28 : 13] But there is one thing that pretty much I think all commentators are agreed on. And what they are agreed on is this. Psalms 1 and 2 together gives us an introduction to the entire book of Psalms.

They work together to give us an introduction as to how we are supposed to read Psalms 3 to 150. Now, let me, this is going to be a little bit technical here, which is why I ask you to keep your Bibles open to the Psalms if you have them.

I'll go through this as fast as I can, but let me just point out some comparisons here for you between the first Psalm and the second Psalm and how these two Psalms work together to give us a reading strategy for the entire book of Psalms.

So here we go. I'll try to be as clear and non-technical as I can, but there's some detail here. First of all, look at Psalm 1, verse 1.

Blessed is the man who. But then, look at Psalm 2, verse 12. Blessed are all who. So Psalm 1, 1 starts off with that phrase, blessed are is the man.

[29 : 35] Psalm 2 concludes that and says, blessed are all who take refuge. So, what scholars believe is that these two Psalms work together and that Psalm 1, 1 with 2, 12 gives us a kind of an inclusio or bookend.

It's a kind of a sandwich structure that ties these two Psalms together. In essence, the two Psalms together tell us who is the blessed person or who are the blessed people.

And then, look at Psalm 1 and verse 1. It says, blessed are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked.

The counsel of the wicked. That is, when the wicked come together and take counsel together. But then, look at Psalm 2 and verse 1. Why do the nations conspire?

Get that idea there? The nations are getting together and taking counsel. They are conspiring. So, both Psalms talk about the counsel of the wicked or getting into some kind of conspiracy.

[30 : 50] So, in essence, Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 is about the original conspiracy theory. And then, Psalm 1 says, blessed is the man who does not stand in the way of sinners.

But then, notice in Psalm 2 it says, the kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord and against the wicked. That ties these two Psalms together.

And then, notice in Psalm 1 verse 5, it talks about the assembly of the righteous when the righteous gather together. But, in Psalm 2 2, it's the rulers of the world who gather together against the Lord and against his anointed.

Now, this is a very interesting one here because it's a quite linguistic connection. Remember again that Psalm 1 verse 2 says, blessed is the one who does not sit in the seat of mockers.

But then, compare that to Psalm 2 verse 4. Now, it says in our English Bibles, the one enthroned in heaven laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.

[32 : 15] But, interestingly, the word enthroned here in Psalm 2 verse 4 is the same word to sit as we have in Psalm 1 verse 2.

So, don't sit in the seat of mockers because the Lord is the one who sits in the heavens and he's the ultimate mocker.

He laughs at the scorners. He scorns them. He mocks them. So, who would you rather have laugh and mock at you? The sinners and the wicked on this world?

Or, would you rather have the Lord laugh at you? Well, I'd rather sit in the way where the mockers and the wicked scoff at me rather than have the Lord scoff at me.

And then, notice this one. And again, this is one where the English translations actually obscure a parallel. Psalm 1 2. It says, on his law, the righteous person, meditates day and night.

[33 : 24] Well, interestingly, when you look at Psalm 2 and verse 2, it says there that the, I'm sorry, Psalm 2 verse 1, it says the people's plot in vain.

It's the same Hebrew word. In Psalm 1 verse 2, the righteous person meditates on the law of the Lord.

But in Psalm 2, the wicked meditate on how they can overthrow the Lord. That ties these two songs together.

together. And for the sake of time here, I'm not going to give you the rest here because we need to pay, I need to sort of draw this to a close.

There are many more comparisons between Psalm 1 and Psalm 2. But what I want you to notice here is how these two psalms work together.

[34 : 30] First of all, Psalm 1 says this, Meditate on the law of the Lord. Obey the Lord.

Give your attention to Him. Delight in Him. Give Him your full allegiance when He speaks.

Pay attention to the Torah, the law, the instruction of the Lord. But then when you come to Psalm 2, we get a similar message, but it's not about the law of the Lord.

It's about the Lord's anointed one, about the king. So Psalm 1 says, reverence God's word. Give full attention to it. Meditate on it.

Delight in it. Love it. But Psalm 2 says, give your full allegiance to God's anointed. Obey the king.

[35 : 31] Delight in him. Kiss the son. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. Now, interestingly, do you know what follows after Psalm 2?

Psalm 3, you're right. Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. But what I want you to do is look at this. Okay, you still have your Bibles open? Look at this. Psalm 1 doesn't have a superscription.

It doesn't have a title at the top. It doesn't have a title. And Psalm 2 doesn't have one either. And that's because I think these two Psalms are introductions to the entire rest of the book of Psalms.

But now, look at Psalm 3. A Psalm of David. Psalm 4. For the director of music with stringed instruments, a Psalm of David.

Psalm 5. For the director of music, for flutes, a Psalm of David. Psalm 6. For the director of music with stringed instruments, according to Shaminit, a Psalm of David.

[36 : 44] And on and on and on it goes. Psalm 1 says, pay attention to the law of the Lord. Psalm 2 says, give your allegiance to David.

Listen to what he says. And then what follows in Psalms 3 and most of the Psalms that come for the next 75 Psalms, Psalms of David.

Do you want to know how to live the way you're supposed to live? Pay attention to the law of the Lord. Pay attention to his instruction. delight yourself in the Torah of the Lord.

Do you want to know how to pray? Do you want to know how to reach out to God? Do you want to know how to read this book? Give your allegiance to Jesus.

Give your allegiance to the King. Now I just spoke ahead of myself there. I actually meant to say, give your allegiance to David. David. But, as I mentioned, I think our English translations are right.

[37 : 54] David is a type of Jesus. David's greater son will come along, Jesus Christ, and when that greater son comes, the son of David, the rightful king, the one who inherits the book of Psalms, he will also show us how to pray these Psalms.

I'm going to get into that next Sunday. How we read the book of Psalms, not directly, just going to the psalm and reading it for ourselves, but how we read the psalms through David's descendant, the rightful heir of the throne of Israel, David's greater son, the Lord's anointed, Jesus Christ himself.

So, for Israel, back in David's day, the message was, Psalm 1, obey the Lord, Psalm 2, obey the king. And part of the way in which you put those two things together is to read the Psalms as the word, not just of David, but of the Lord.

They are the inspired Psalms of what who has been the person who is called the sweet singer of Israel. But there will come a day when there will be an even sweeter singer of Israel and that is Jesus, the Lord's anointed.

So, in preparation for next Sunday, think about how Jesus is the one who teaches us how to read and how to pray the Psalms.

[39 : 46] That will be our topic next week.