

Omnibus – Psalms
By Rich Lusk

Prologue

Can music change the world? In the 1960s, rock stars thought so, and styled themselves as cultural prophets. Their songs were going to transform society, end war, and bring in an age of love and peace. In 1971, Jann Wenner, co-founder and publisher of *Rolling Stone* explained the philosophy behind his magazine and the music it covered:

Rolling Stone was founded and continues to operate in the belief that rock ‘n’ roll music is the energy center for all sorts of changes revolving rapidly around us: social, political, cultural, however you want to describe them. The fact is for many of us who’ve grown up since World War II, rock ‘n’ roll provided the first revolutionary insight into who we are and where we are at in this country...¹

There can be no doubt that rock is a high energy cultural form that has pervaded our society (though it has been giving way to other popular music forms for some time now). As Wenner suggests, rock music had political and cultural goals from the start of the genre. Some might say that the musicians eventually sold out, giving up politics to focus on sex, drugs, and money. Or maybe sex, drugs, and money *were* the political agenda from the beginning. Whatever the case, there is no doubt rock music played a role in bringing the counter-culture of the 1960s into the mainstream culture within a generation. But the quest of rock artists to usher in a new age of love and peace quite obviously never materialized. Nevertheless, the mission of changing the world through music is still very much with us.

Those who looked for revolution to take place through rock had the right idea, but the wrong music. Music really *can* change the world. Indeed, God has given his people a collection of songs aimed at doing just that. Right in the center of our Bibles is God’s very own hymn book, known as the book of Psalms. The Psalms are written as poetic prayers, designed to be sung in corporate worship. They were inspired by God’s Spirit to change us, as his covenant people, and ultimately to change the world. Using the Psalter in prayer and song is one of the most powerful tools the church has to bring about the transformation of culture. Of course, the Psalms will not bring in the kind of revolution the 1960s rockers were trying to ignite; it will be a different kind of revolution, a revolution based on the love and justice of God, as defined by his Word.

General Information
Author and Context

The main author of the book of Psalms is David. Moses, Solomon, Asaph, and a handful of other figures also made contributions, as the titles in the Psalter indicate. It is important to understand that while many Psalms may have originated in a private context, these songs have been brought together into a book intended for public, corporate use. We should not think of the Psalms as David’s private prayer journal, but as Israel’s (and now the church’s) foundational hymn book. The experiences of the Psalm writers should

be considered personal, but not private. The Psalms give us a paradigm for understanding, exploring, and expressing the life of faith, including its pains and struggles, in the context of the covenant community.

One of the church fathers, Diodore, wrote,

When our souls find in the psalms the most ready formulation of the concerns they wish to bring before God, they recognize them as a wonderfully appropriate remedy. For the Holy Spirit anticipated all kinds of human situations, setting forth through the most blessed David the proper words for our sufferings through which the afflicted may find healing.²

Martin Luther called the Psalter “the Bible in miniature” in which “you have before you a fine, bright, spotless mirror that will show you the kind of thing Christianity is.”³ John Calvin spoke in glowing terms about the Psalter, saying “I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, the anatomy of all the parts of the soul,”⁴ meaning that it covers the whole breadth and range of human experience from a sanctified perspective.

The fact that the Psalms were written largely by David—a great man, but also one who stumbled many times, as we do—comforts us. We can truly use the Psalms as a textbook of our own souls, for the psalmists share in our weaknesses and trials. There is a Psalm for every legitimate human emotion and every situation we face.

For many men today, poetry seems effeminate and church music in general seems wimpy. David would beg to differ. He was both a warrior and a poet. His songs are full of passion and fire. Singing the Psalms will form our character in unique ways—certainly very few uninspired hymns cover the same territory as the Psalter (e.g., Psalm 139:19–22). Singing the Psalms can make us tough enough to face the kinds of battles David faced, such as when he killed a wild bear and took down Goliath. In a narcissistic, therapeutic culture like our own, the Psalms get us out of our own little private, self-centered worlds, and help us to focus our energies on God’s warfare against evil and oppression in the world. The psalms are distinctively militant, calling on God to bring judgment against those who oppose his kingdom and stand in the way of his grace.

But if the psalms can make us tough, but they can also make us tender. Several Psalms, if sung faithfully, will tenderize our hearts and minds to God’s grace and to the needs of others. In the Psalms we learn how to confess our sin; we learn true humility; we learn our smallness before the overwhelming majesty of God; and we learn the importance of showing mercy to others in need even as the Lord has shown us mercy. The Psalms teach us about the importance of community with other believers and our obligation to pursue the lost with the good news of God’s gracious reign. The Psalms fill us with a desire to worship the living God and give us a heart for the global mission of God’s kingdom.

Of course, the most important function of the Psalms is to point us to Christ, who fulfills them all. Christ is the King the psalmists prayed for; more than that (as we will see), Christ prayed *through* the psalmists as his forerunners. In this book, we not only have prayers *about* Christ but prayers *of* Christ. The Psalms have rightly been called the war songs of the Prince of Peace.⁵ By praying them, we learn to trust in Christ as our

King and savior, as well as imitate his life of faithfulness. The Psalter celebrates Christ's gifts of forgiveness and renewal, as well as his ultimate victory over his enemies.

Significance

The Psalter came to hold a unique and central place in the life of old covenant Israel. It's been rightly said that ancient Israel enjoyed life as a whole through the medium of music. Psalm singing was central to their corporate life and culture. They not only sang psalms in temple and synagogue worship, but also made liberal use of the Psalter in the midst of daily activities. They were a musical people and the Psalms served as the soundtrack of their lives.

David, the chief author of the Psalter, was also responsible for organizing Israel's priesthood to include trained musicians, orchestras, and choirs. The record of David's kingship in 1–2 Chronicles pay special attention to his musical reforms, which must stand among his life's greatest achievements. If Moses was responsible for organizing Israel's worship through the sacrifice of animals, David was responsible for organizing their worship through the sacrifice of musical praise. He glorified the national liturgy by giving sacred song a new place of prominence.

From the earliest days of the church, the Psalms have formed the basic prayer book and hymnal for Christians. Clement of Alexandria gives a little snapshot of how Psalm singing fit into the joyous, thankful life of the Christian:

Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea hymning... And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in Scripture before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during the night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir.⁶

For Clement, Christians sang Psalms not only to shape noble character, but to express thanks and praise to God. This was considered the highest function of music.

Other church fathers, like Basil, also extolled the importance of the Psalter in the life of the church:

A psalm drives away demons, summons the help of angels, furnishes arms against nightly terrors, and gives respite from daily toil; to little children it is safety, to men in their prime adornment, to the old a solace, to women their most fitting ornament. It peoples solitudes, it brings agreement to market places. To novices it is a beginning; to those who are advancing, an increase; to those who are concluding, a confirmation. A psalm is the voice of the church. It gladdens fast days, it creates grief which is in accord with God's will, for a psalm brings a tear even to a heart of stone.⁷

Likewise, Jerome wrote to Demetrias that she should, "always [pray and sing psalms] at the third, sixth, and ninth hours, at evening, in the middle of the night and at dawn." In another case, he advised a young Christian woman to "learn the Psalter by heart."⁸ One

of the reasons for the spread of early Christianity though the Roman Empire was the beauty and attractiveness of its psalmody and hymnody.

At the Reformation, the book of psalms played a vital role in theological and liturgical reforms. Calvin commissioned musicians to put the psalms to singable melodies, which became known as “Genevan jigs” for their lively style. According to Calvin, the psalms give us the gospel:

In one word, not only will we here find general commendations of the goodness of God, which may teach men to repose themselves in him alone, and to seek all their happiness solely in him; and which are intended to teach true believers with their whole hearts confidently to look to him for help in all their necessities; but we will also find that the free remission of sins, which alone reconciles God towards us, and procures for us settled peace with him, is so set forth and magnified, as that here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation.¹⁰

The Reformation was, among other things, a revival of congregational Psalm singing, the likes of which had not been seen since the early days of the church.

Historian James Hastings Nichols explains the centrality of the Psalter in Reformational church life and piety, focusing especially on the French Reformers, known as Huguenots:

As the staple of private and family worship as well as of the services of the church, the psalms became known to many by heart. No other book of the Old Testament, at least, could rival the psalms in the affections and knowledge of Reformed laymen. Ministers frequently preached from the psalms also; the Psalter was the only Old Testament book on which Calvin preached on Sundays. For every occasion, it seems an appropriate verse would leap to the tongue of a Huguenot.

When the Huguenots were facing persecution, they turned to the Psalter for strength and encouragement. Again, Nichols:

And all over France, wherever Huguenots of the first generation were confined, often sometimes by the score, guards and jailers became familiar with the psalms, even to the prisons on Santo Domingo and Martinique. The colporteurs who carried the psalters, with Bibles and catechisms, all over France, were frequently caught and burned. Many martyrs died with the words of the Apostles’ Creed, but it is surprising to what a range of the psalter was drawn on by others. The courage and joy of these martyrs who, like the ancient Christians, could have had release for a word, won converts among the onlookers. The authorities tried gags, but the cord would burn and from the smoke the psalm would again begin. The bishops then ordered that the tongues of the Huguenots should be cut out before they were burned. This became the general practice...When the fifty-seven Protestants of Meaux were led off to the dungeons they lamented [using Psalm 79]...the fourteen of them who were later led out to execution sang from the same psalm

until their tongues were cut out...When armed resistance began, Ps. 68 became the Huguenot [war chant]...At the Battle of Coutras, the Reformed soldiers knelt and prayed and sang. Roman Catholic courtiers, observing, cried out that they were afraid and were confessing, but a more experienced officer said it was not so. They were singing [Psalm 118]...¹¹

It's hard imagine any other songs sustaining these saints as they faced such suffering and grueling tests of faith. Of course, the Huguenots are hardly alone in their love for psalm singing. Throughout church history, the Psalms have played a vital role in Christian faith and practice.

These stories echo through the churches of the Reformation in Scotland, in the Netherlands, in Puritan England and in America. Wherever Protestants went, they loved and sang and lived by the Psalter.

Summary and Setting

Historically, it is obvious that the Psalter had to undergo a process of development, as individual psalms were written, collected, and canonized. The bulk of the Psalms were written at the time of David (about 1000 B.C.), but some came before (e.g., Psalm 90) and some came after (e.g., Psalm 72). We do not know exactly when the Psalms were put into their final canonical form. Most likely inspired editors during the post-exilic era of Ezra and Nehemiah shaped the Psalter into the form in which we have it today.

It is important to note that the Psalms are not thrown together haphazardly or randomly. There is an order and logic to the 150 songs that compose the book. In fact, the book of Psalms is actually organized into five books, each of which has a narrative flow and concludes with a doxology (or series of doxologies).¹² Each book within the Psalter has its own distinctive characteristics and themes. For example, most of Book I was written by David and generally uses the name YHWH for God. The Psalms in Book 2 are by David (or the sons of Korah), and the name Elohim is normally used for God. And so forth. While the inner logic may not always be immediately clear to us, the arrangement and organization of the Psalter is deliberate.

The five books are divided this way:

Book I	Psalms 1–41
Book II	Psalms 42–72
Book III	Psalms 73–89
Book IV	Psalms 90–106
Book V	Psalms 107–150

Psalm 1 introduces the entire Psalter, as well as the first book of Psalms. It serves as a transitional bridge from the era of Moses (focused on the law) to the era of David (focused on the kingdom). If Psalm 1 is a gateway to the Psalter as a whole, then Psalms 146–150, a block of praise songs, serve as resounding conclusion not only to Book V, but to the book of Psalms in its entirety. The trajectory of the Psalter is from law (Psalm 1) to praise (Psalm 146-150). In other words, the piety of the Psalter is not only focused on giving God obedience, but ultimately giving him delighted and vigorous worship. This

joyous, exuberant praise described in the final group of Psalms is the goal of all creation and history. The overall structure of the Psalter shows us that a life of meditation on God's law and walking in God's ways has its proper outcome in victorious worship and celebration.

As mentioned, each of the five books within the Psalter tells a story. To give one example of how narrative flow works within the Psalter, consider Book V. This book, from beginning to end, tells the story of exodus, exile, and new exodus.

In Psalm 107, we find God rescuing and gathering his people just as he delivered them out of Egyptian slavery. Psalms 108–110 describe God's victory over his enemies, again reminding us of the defeat of Pharaoh in the first exodus. Psalms 111–118 praise God for his mighty deliverance, much as the Israelites celebrated the Red Sea crossing with the Song of Moses (Exo. 15). Not surprisingly, we find next a meditation on the law given at Sinai (Psalm 119). Psalms 120–136 are known as "Psalms of Ascent" and they continue the story by focusing on worship. After God gave the law to Moses, the Israelites built the tabernacle as a center for worship, so naturally worship Psalms come next in the sequence of Book V. Psalm 137 then stands on its own, asking a critical question: How can Israel sing Zion's songs in a foreign land? This might correspond to the time of wilderness wandering or to the period of exile in Israel's history. The answer to the question forced upon Israel by exile is answered in Psalm 138–145. These are royal Psalms describing the kind of righteous king Israel needs. The answer to exile will ultimately be found in the coming of a new and greater David, a messianic king. What will happen when the king comes? God's people, and indeed all of creation, will burst with praise. In Psalm 146–150, we find an explosion of joyous worship, a final crescendo of honor and adoration given to Israel's covenant Lord, as the whole creation fulfills its purpose of glorifying God.

This is at best a bird's eye view, and there is no space here to fill in the details. But it should be clear how the themes and progression of Book V track with the story of Israel from exodus, to exile, to the coming of the kingdom, to the kingdom's consummation. It is a stylized narrative summary of redemptive history.

Artistic Structure

David and the other psalmists were brilliant composers, and these songs display their consummate wisdom and skill. The Psalms are musical poetry at its finest. As poetry, the Psalms make use of a number of literary forms. Literary analysis of these songs usually pays rich dividends. We cannot explore all these literary features, but a few major ones should be mentioned. The Psalter is full of metaphors, symbolism, and lively imagery. But we will focus more on the literary structures the authors built into their texts.

The poetry we are familiar with in the modern West tends to use rhyme or meter as a structuring device. For the Hebrews, parallelism was the basic poetic form.¹³ One cannot understand the Psalms without understanding the role and function of parallelism. For example, consider these lines from Psalm 2:

Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?

Or these lines from Psalm 139:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?

In each case, the second line repeats, but elaborates on the first. Traditionally, when the Psalms would be used in a liturgical setting, the first line would be called out by the leader; the people would then echo back with the second line. In other words, the Psalms are designed for congregational participation.¹⁴

There are a wide variety of parallelisms, including synonymous, in which the two lines reverberate with the same basic meaning (e.g., Psalm 1:1); antithetic, in which the two lines form a sharp contrast (e.g., Psalm 44:3); and climatic, in which the meaning intensifies (Psalm 29:3–9).

Chiasm is another literary form deeply pervasive in the Psalter. A chiastic structure follows the kind of pattern seen in Psalm 70:

- A. Appeal to God: “deliver me O God; hasten to help me” (70:1)
- B. Malediction towards enemies (70:2–3)
- B.’ Benediction towards those who seek God (70:4)
- A.’ Appeal to God: “hasten O God; you are my help” (70:5)¹⁵

There are chiasms of various sizes in the Psalter, from just a few lines to entire, lengthy Psalms. The matching sections are generally mutually interpretative, so the first A and B sections above, help us understand the later B’ and A’ sections because they balance each other.

Some Psalms use an acrostic (or partial acrostic) device. In these Psalms, each line (or section) begins with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (Obviously, this cannot be captured in translation.) Examples include Psalm 9–10, 25, 34, 119 (a celebration of the law of God “from A to Z”—each section of this longest chapter in the Bible begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and 145.

Finally some Psalms use refrains (e.g., Psalm 136). These repeating lines are by no means the “vain repetition” Jesus condemned (Matt. 6:7). Instead, they are ways of powerfully driving the truth into the minds and hearts of those who sing and pray them. Like water flowing over a rock, slowly softening its edges, repeated phrases and lines in the Psalter mold and shape us with regular usage.

Worldview

The Centrality of Music to the Christian Life

“Tell me what you sing and I’ll tell you who you are.” “I don’t care who makes the laws as long as I get to write the songs people sing.” These proverbial sayings capture the power of music to shape culture and form personal identity. Music is never neutral; it has an effect on us that reaches into the very depths of our being.

The Bible is not given to us first and foremost as a theology textbook, but as a storybook and a songbook. God is a musician (Zeph. 3:17); in fact, the church fathers

described God the Father as Singer, God the Son as Word/Lyric, and God the Spirit as Melody.¹⁶ Because we are made in the image of the music-making God, music is foundational to human life. Martin Luther grasped this, and expounded frequently on the importance of music:

I have always loved music. He who knows this art is in the right frame, and fitted for every good pursuit. We can not do without music in our schools. A schoolmaster must know how to sing, or I would not allow him to teach. Nor ought we to ordain young theologians to the sacred office, unless they have first been well-tried and practiced in the art in the school.

For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate . . . what more effective means than music could you find?...[Music] is a mistress and governess of those human emotions.

Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world...

Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching...Music drives away the Devil and makes people gay...Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. I would not change what little I know of music for something great.

Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart. We know that to the devils music is distasteful and insufferable. My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues.¹⁷

Given the importance of music, it is not surprising that the longest book in the Bible is a hymn book. The Psalms are at the heart of biblical worship and theology. Because the Psalms are songs, we must remember they were written not merely to be studied, or to be read, or even to be spoken, but primarily to be sung. Thus, we should ask: How does the Psalter (and the rest of the Bible) help us develop a biblical theology of music? How should we make practical use of the Psalter in the church? And how can Psalms train us in righteousness?

Obviously, God has given us inspired texts to sing, but not inspired melodies. We do not know exactly how the Psalms were sung in ancient Israel, and scholarly attempts to reconstruct their musical forms have met with mixed success.¹⁸ There is no doubt the Psalms can be matched with a variety of musical styles, and have been in the past. For example, the medieval church chanted the Psalms, while Calvin and the Puritans set them to meter. The key is for composers to provide melodies that mesh well with the content of the texts and the corporate usage for which the Psalter was intended. It would not be fitting to put Psalm 51 to a lively dance tune, or Psalm 150 to a slow, somber dirge. It is

essential that the church have singable melodies for the Psalms so that she can employ them in public worship.

The Psalter calls attention to the importance of instrumentation. Again and again, the Psalmist instructs us to praise God using a variety of instruments (e.g., Psalm 150). We also find that these instruments are to be played skillfully (Psalm 33:3, 149:3), so there is also a concern for the aesthetic quality of our musical praise.

The references to instrumental accompaniment point us to the fact that the Psalms are really war songs. For example, trumpets are prominent in the Psalter (e.g., Psalm 98:6; 150:3), but trumpets throughout Scripture are primarily used for mustering troops and/or worshippers (e.g., Num. 7:7–10; Neh. 4:20; Ezek 33:2–6). In Psalm 144:1, David asks God to train his fingers for war, but we find a few verses later that he’s really talking about learning to play the harp (144:9)! God calls his people to fight their spiritual battles first and foremost through worship (e.g., 2 Chron. 20:1–30) and the Psalter belongs on the front lines in this “holy warfare” (note that according to 2 Chronicles 20:21, Jehoshaphat’s army/choir sang Psalm 106:1 as they marched into battle).

In the book of Psalms, we learn that worship is holistic, involving not just the heart but the body. The heart-religion of the Psalter is evident from beginning to end. But we also find bodily actions accompanying the music and singing. In the Bible worship is not purely a mental or attitudinal matter. We also find bodily gestures such as clapping, shouting, kneeling, and processing playing a vital role. In fact the word for worship in Old Testament and New Testament basically means “to bow down,” obviously a bodily action. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, the psalms show us that true worship is full of “gusto”; it is not just contemplative, but loud, vibrant, and energetic.¹⁹

Biblically, the purposes of music go beyond mere enjoyment and include the formation of character. The church fathers and Reformers recognized this reality. Thus, Clement of Alexandria wrote, “Music then is to be handled for the sake of embellishment [to glorify words] and for the composure of manners [to shape character].”²⁰ Music shapes our attitudes and habits over time. It has the power to mold people, for better or worse. Music can stimulate and even manipulate our emotions, which is why some (like the ancient philosopher Plato and the sixteenth Reformer Ulrich Zwingli) have been suspicious of it. But throughout Scripture, we find God’s Spirit using music to stir up holy desires (2 Chron. 29:20–30; Eph. 5:18–20), as it did for Augustine:

How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feeling of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience.²¹

Augustine obviously loved music and gave it a central place in Christian experience. Augustine also recognized that music is a form of rhetoric. That is, it is designed to persuade us, to move us to action, to train our senses in the recognition and appreciation of beauty, and to shape us holistically. John Calvin believed the same. Noting the power of music, he said songs could be used by God “to recreate man and give him pleasure.” The influence of music makes it all the more important to consider carefully the songs that fill our ears and mouths: “Wherefore, we must be the more diligent in ruling it in such a manner that it may be useful to us and in no way pernicious.”²²

The Psalter shows us that ultimately all of creation exists to praise God. In fact, the church fathers talked about creation singing a “cosmic hymn” and medieval Christians spoke of the “music of the spheres”; more recent theologians have spoken of the universe existing in “musical harmony” and performing a “cosmic dance according to God’s tune.” The Psalter affirms that all of creation in some way sings to God’s glory (e.g., Psalm 98:4–9, 150:6; cf. Isa. 44:23; Rev. 4–5); man’s role is join in this song and articulate creation’s song as a royal priesthood before the throne of God. God has given us the songs of the Psalter that we might “get in tune” with this cosmic hymn and sing our part in the cosmic choir. In the words of Origen,

So we sing to God and his only begotten as do the sun, the moon, the stars and the entire heavenly host. For all these form a sacred chorus and sing hymns to the God of all and his only begotten along with those among men who are just.²³

At the end of the Bible, when Babylon is destroyed, the wicked city is told that “the sound of harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters shall not be heard in you anymore” (Rev. 18:22). In hell, there will no singing, only the sounds of weeping and wailing and the gnashing of teeth. But the joyous songs of the righteous go on forever and ever.

The Christology of the Psalter: Viewing the Psalms as the Prayers of Christ

The question is sometimes asked: “Which Psalms are messianic? That is, which Psalms specifically point us to Christ as the Greater David, the promised King?” The right answer is “All 150 Psalms are messianic!”

In Luke 24:44, we find that Jesus viewed the entire Old Testament, including the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, as prophetic of his person and work, his sufferings and his glory. But the Psalms are not simply songs *about* Christ; they are actually spoken *by* Christ. They are his prayers, his songs, inspired by his Spirit and written down by his forerunners.

In Hebrews 2:12, we find the words of Psalm 22:22 put in the mouth of Jesus. The words of the Psalmist are treated as the words of Jesus. He is the choirmaster, leading God’s people in song when they gather for worship. But what’s interesting is this: We have no record in the gospels that Jesus actually quoted these words (though he did cite Psalm 22:1 on the cross), but they are treated as his own speech nevertheless.

Hebrews 10:5–7 does the same thing with Psalm 40. We have no record of Jesus quoting Psalm 40, or making these words his own. The original human author was probably not thinking of the incarnation of the Son in human flesh when he wrote them. And yet these verses in Hebrews are treated as Jesus’ own prayer, sung when he entered the world.

If we combine these examples with the numerous Psalms Jesus speaks directly with his own voice in the gospel records (e.g., Psalm 22:1 in Matthew 27:46; Psalm 6:3–4 in John 12:27; Psalm 69:4 in John 15:25; Psalm 69:21 in John 19:28; Psalm 31:5 in Luke 23:46; Psalm 6:8 in Matthew 7:23; etc.), as well as those applied to him indirectly (e.g., Psalm 78:2 in Matthew 13:35; Psalm 69:9 in John 2:16–17), we must conclude that *the book of Psalms is ultimately the prayer book of Jesus*. Just as Jesus is portrayed as a new David, so he is the true Psalmist.

Augustine wrote, “The voice of Christ and His Church was well-nigh the only voice to be heard in the Psalms...we ought to recognize his voice in all the Psalms.”²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains more elaborately:

According to the witness of the Bible, David is, as the anointed king of the chosen people of God, a prototype of Jesus Christ. What happens to him happens to him for the sake of the one who is in him and who is said to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ...David was a witness to Christ in his office, in his life, and in his words. The New Testament says even more. In the psalms of David the promised Christ himself speaks...These same words which David spoke, therefore, the future Messiah spoke through him. The prayers of David were prayed also by Christ. Or better, Christ himself prayed them through his forerunner David.²⁵

Reading the Psalms as the prayers of Christ also brings a new dimension to our understanding of Jesus’ humanness. When we see that the weakness of the psalmist is really the weakness of the Son of God in human form, we see his humility and sufferings on our behalf in a deeper way. We have a Lord and Savior who fully understands human suffering and temptation (cf. Heb. 4:15; 5:7–8). The God-man knows what it is like to endure betrayal by a friend (Ps. 38:11), loneliness (Psalm 25:19–20), doubt (Psalm 22:1–2), and the ultimate forms of pain and torment (Psalm 22:1, 14–16). Because he has been through the most difficult aspects of human experience, he can strengthen us. Indeed, because he has faced all these trials while keeping “clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:4), he can help us live faithfully in any circumstance.

Reading the Psalms as the prayers of Christ also reveal to us something of the inter-Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son. In the book of Psalms, we find the Father and Son serving one another in bonds of perfect love (e.g., Psalm 18). The Son calls upon the Father and the Father answers. The Son trusts and obeys the will of the Father, fulfilling his assigned mission; therefore the Father vindicates him against his enemies, exalts him to the highest position, and promises him the nations as his inheritance (see Psalm 2, Psalm 110; cf. Phil. 2:5–11). The Son proclaims his loyalty to the Father (Psalm 7), while the Father expresses his delight in the Son (Psalm 2:7–9; 18:19).

The Trinitarian structure of the Psalter has huge implications for Christian worship, as Charles Drew suggests:

At the most profound theological level, worship is a spectator sport. We gather to watch the Father vindicate his Son in the preaching of the gospel and to watch the Son give praise to the Father in the praises of our lips. For the Spirit of Christ indwells us, and that Spirit lives to extol the Father and Son...When next you gather for public worship, why not ask the Lord to catch you up into the praises of the Godhead? Ask him to give you in abundance the Spirit of Christ so that your songs might be the songs of the One who loved his Father to the end, and your joy might be the joy of the Son who was lifted from the tomb by the Father’s embrace.²⁶

If we see the Psalms as the prayers of Christ, several apparent problems with these songs get sorted out. For example, there are several imprecatory Psalms; that is, prayers in which the psalmist asks God to execute the wicked (e.g., Psalm 69, 109, 137, 139, etc.). It would seem difficult to reconcile such prayers of cursing with other biblical admonitions to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and bless rather than curse. But if we understand these psalms as the prayers of Christ, the problem resolves itself. Christ came to establish God's merciful reign and to show grace to sinners. But Christ also calls on his Father to execute vengeance on those who simply will not repent, but who instead choose to persist in their rebellious and idolatrous ways. For us to ask judgment on our enemies would be an act of self-righteousness; but for us to pray in union with Christ that God would judge his enemies is entirely appropriate.²⁷

It might be asked: How can the psalms be the prayers of Jesus, if the Psalter contains prayers of confession and Jesus never sinned (e.g., Psalm 32, 51)? Further, how can we pray the parts of the Psalter that claim righteousness when we still sin in many ways (e.g., Psalm 7:8)? These theological conundrums are most clearly answered in the Pauline epistles because Paul most fully develops the doctrine of the church's union with Christ. In becoming incarnate as man and in his baptism, the Son of God united himself to us; thus, he is made a sin offering, representing us (2 Corinthians 5:21), and we are made participants in his death, resurrection, and reign (Rom. 6:1–14; Eph. 2:6; etc.).

The Son became one of us in order to take what was ours and make it his own; thus, all our wrongdoings were charged to him at the cross, where he died a sinner's death. In a very real sense, Jesus not only died *for* us, he died *as* us. Thus, because of his union with us, all the Psalms in which the speaker confesses his guilt and iniquity become Christ's own prayers on our behalf. If what happened at Calvary has any saving significance for us, it is only because Jesus claimed our sins as his own; he can truly say, "O God, you know my foolishness and my sins are not hidden from you" (Psalm 69:5) because he has made himself one with us, his weak and sinful people.

Even as Christ takes what is ours, he gives us what is his. He takes our poverty so we can share in his riches (2 Cor. 8:9). Christ is perfectly righteous; in union with him we come to share in that righteous status and character. We can pray, "Judge me, O Lord according to my righteousness, and according to my integrity within me" (Psalm 7:8) because we are one with Christ, legally and experientially. Again, he took what was ours (sin and condemnation) in order to give us what is his (righteousness and life).

The "I" of the Psalter is both Christ *and* his people together (or *totus christus*, the whole Christ, head and body, in the words of Augustine). Christ is the key to the book of Psalms even as he is the key to whole of the Bible. The Psalms, with the rest of Scripture, find fulfillment in our loving, gracious, and holy Savior. We must pray and sing the Psalms in union with him.

For Further Reading

Adams, James E. *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1991.

Jones, Paul S. *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2006.

Mays, James Luther. *Psalms*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989.

Veritas Press Bible Cards: *Judges through Kings*. Lancaster, Pa.: Veritas Press. 53.

Session I: Prelude

A Question to Consider:

Music and worship style are among the most controversial topics in the church today. What role should the Psalms play in current debates? How could a recovery of the Psalter help the church resolve at least some of these disputes? What do the psalms teach us, explicitly and implicitly, about worship and worship and music?

Christians disagree on musical and worship styles for a variety of reasons, some of which have to do with divergent theological understandings of what a worship service is about, others of which have to do with differences of culture and personal preference.

However, one thing all Christians should agree on is that the psalms should have a place of centrality in the church's worship. Sadly, this does not seem to be the case today. Despite the fact that Paul commanded the church to sing Psalms (Eph. 5:18-21), the church rarely follows through in obedience to that instruction. The result is liturgical chaos in our churches.

If we agreed to use the Psalter in a central way in our worship services we might find an emerging unity on a number of other divisive issues, such as musical instrumentation, congregational participation, liturgical repetition, and bodily posture.

While differences of style might still remain, since the Psalter does not dictate any one type of music to be used, a wide ranging use of the Psalter in worship might bring much needed balance to our worship. For example, some Christians stress worship as a time of reverent service before God. Other Christians stress our intimacy and nearness with God in worship. But the Psalter keeps both fear and friendship in a healthy tension. Similarly, some church traditions emphasize truth, while others focus on emotion and experience. But in the Psalter, we find both the mind and heart fully engaged.

From the General Information above answer the following questions:

1. Rock star Bono said the following about the Psalms:

Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do -- they introduced me to God, not belief in God, more an experiential sense of GOD...As a result, the Book of Psalms always felt open to me and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the book of John...My religion could not be fiction, but it had to transcend facts. It could be mystical, but not mythical.²⁸

How has God used music, especially the Psalms, in church history? How has God used the Psalms (and other music) to open your life to the gospel?

There is no doubt the Psalms have played a huge role in the shaping of the church's culture, from the very beginning of her existence. Acts 2 says that the first Christians "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." "The prayers" in view here might well be the Psalter, which was considered the "prayer book" of the Jews. This hunch gets further confirmation in Acts 4, the first record of a Christian prayer meeting we have that includes any details. When the disciples gathered to pray for their persecuted brethren, they recited (or sang) together Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23ff).

The church fathers make continual reference to the book of Psalms, not only for the central role it played in corporate worship, but also for its importance in the daily life and piety of believers. Augustine made it clear that the psalms played a vital role in his spiritual awakening. Many Protestant hymn writers followed the ancient church in using the Psalter as a model and standard for their own compositions. Numerous historians have regarded psalmody as perhaps the most distinguishing mark of Protestants at the time of the Reformation. When the Roman Catholic rulers in France wanted to slowly erode the freedoms granted to Protestants under the Edict of Nantes, they did so by prohibiting the public, and then private, singing of Psalms. Outlawing the Psalter was functionally the same as outlawing the Reformed faith.

Throughout history, God has used the Psalms not only to shape the corporate life of the church, but also to awaken individual hearts to the majesty and mystery of his being, attributes, and works. As poetic Scripture, the Psalms bring out a side of God that is often missing in our modern churches, where we have tended to focus on the rational and systematic, over and against the experiential and symbolic. The Psalms provide us with a perfect, divinely inspired form of words for expressing our faith and love towards God in virtually every circumstance we will ever face.

2. The Psalms put a great deal of stress on public worship. The Psalter as a whole was written for congregational use (though it can obviously be used by Christians in other contexts as a vehicle of praise). Eugene Peterson writes the following:

God gives us various means to grow: prayer and Scripture silence and solitude, suffering and service. But the huge foundational means is public worship. Spiritual growth cannot take place in isolation. It is not a private thing between the Christian and God. In worship, we come before God who loves us in the presence of others whom he loves. In worship, more than at any other times, we set ourselves in deliberate openness to the action of God and the need of neighbor, both of which require us to grow up to the fullness of the stature of Christ, who is both God and man for us. Regular, faithful worship is as essential to the growing Christian as food and shelter to the growing child. Worship is the light and air in which spiritual growth takes place.²⁹

Is Peterson right to focus the primacy of corporate worship in the way? Do the Psalms support this view?

The Psalms should certainly function in the private devotions and prayers of Christian individuals and families. But there is a lot of evidence within the Psalter itself that the Psalms come into their own when they are used as vehicles of corporate praise. The Psalms continually mention praising God in a public context (e.g., 22:22). The psalmist explicitly states that God values the corporate worship of his people above their family devotions (87:2-3). Throughout church history, the Psalter has been the church's primary text for lyrics and prayers, so it has woven itself deeply into the corporate worship of God's people.

3. What is the relationship between worship and “holy war” in the Bible?

Worship is presented as a form of warfare in many texts in the Bible. Worship is not a form of escape from or retreat from the world. Rather, in worship, we engage our true enemy, the principalities and powers Paul mentions in Ephesians 6 and elsewhere. Worship is a means of spiritual warfare in heavenly places.

In the Old Testament, the same instrument that summoned worshippers also mustered the army (trumpets). The priests engaged in a kind of symbolic holy war when they used a sword to kill animals that had taken on the sin of the people. David was both a musician and a great warrior, and it is clear from many of the Psalms that these two vocations were very closely linked. David fought against the demons that tormented Saul by playing his harp (1 Sam. 16:14ff).

We see this same conjoining of worship and warfare elsewhere in the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus, God defeats Egypt and frees his people from slavery in response to the prayers of his people (Exo. 3:7). In Joshua 6, Israel defeats Jericho by marching in a liturgical procession and blowing trumpets to the Lord. In 1 Samuel 7, Samuel wins the battle of Mizpah by offering sacrifice and crying out to the Lord before the battle begins. In 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat responded to a military threat with prayer and musical praise. When they went out to meet the enemy, the Levitical choir led the way – hardly an ordinary military tactic. And, yet God responded to their praise by setting ambushes for their enemy and giving his people the victory. They waged liturgical warfare and triumphed!

In the New Testament, we see Jesus defeating Satan in the wilderness by proclaiming the word of God (Matt. 4). God broke the chains that bound Paul and Silas as they prayed and sang hymns (Acts 16:25). In the book of Revelation, the church triumphs through praise, prayer, and proclamation. For example, in Revelation 8, when the prayers of the saints ascend, fire is sent down from heaven., Later in Revelation, the sounding of the trumpet means the downfall of the wicked.

Obviously, there is no power in our prayers and praises, considered in themselves. In fact, worship is a way of confessing our own powerlessness and our utter dependence upon God's power. It sounds crazy to think we could charge the gates of hell with nothing more than hymnals and prayer books in hand, but Scripture shows us again and again, this is the way to victory. Worship is potent to change the world and overthrow the church's enemies because we are calling on the Lord of Heavenly Hosts to rise up and act on our behalf. When we use the world's weapons, and fight on the world's terms, we find the world has a countermeasure for every move we make. But when we seek the Lord's face in prayer and praise, we avail ourselves of a power for which there is no worldly countermeasure and the culture is changed.

4. How does music shape character? Can you see examples of music shaping people in positive and negative ways in our culture?

We do not want to make extra-biblical rules about what kinds of music Christians should or should not listen to. We also want to recognize that there are different forms of music for different zones of life (e.g., there are various forms of music appropriate for different environments and functions). While we are required to sing Psalms (Eph. 5:18-21), we are not forbidden to enjoy other types of music, even if it comes from a secular origin.

Nevertheless, we need to be very careful about what we listen to, just as we must be careful about what we watch and read. Music can form and shape identity and character in subtle, yet profound, ways.

The church father John Chrysostom saw the daily use of Psalms as a defense against worldliness. In one of his commentaries on the Psalms, he wrote:

[T]each your children and wives also to sing such songs, not only while weaving or while engaged in other tasks, but especially at a table. For since the devil generally lies in wait at banquets, having as his allies drunkenness and gluttony, along with inordinate laughter and an unbridled spirit, it is necessary especially then, both before and after the meal, to construct a defense against him from the psalms and to arise from the banquet together with wife and children to sing sacred hymns to God.

John Calvin also emphasized the centrality of the Psalter in shaping Christ-like character and a sacrificial pattern of life. In the introduction to his commentary on the Psalter, he wrote:

Moreover, although the Psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and righteousness, yet they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross; and the bearing of the cross is a genuine proof of our obedience, since by doing this, we renounce the guidance of our own affections, and submit ourselves entirely to God, leaving him to govern us, and to dispose of our life according to his will, so that the afflictions which are

the bitterest and most severe to our nature, become sweet to us, because they proceed from him.

5. What does the literary artistry of the Psalter teach us about the way to the church is to use the Psalms?

The parallelism of the Psalter was designed for dialogical usage where a leader calls out the first line and the people echo back with a matching line. In other words, the Psalter demands participatory worship. Parallelism may also indicate God designed the Psalter to eventually be used in a global, multi-cultural church since parallelism is one of the few poetic forms that easily translates from one language to another.

6. If you had summarize the overarching theme of the Psalter, how would you do it? How does the New Testament's use of Psalter help you grasp its overall meaning?

The Psalms as a whole are about Jesus Christ, the Greater David and the promised Messiah, as well as his kingdom. The Psalms should basically be read and used as the prayer book of Christ himself, as he is united to his people for the sake of their salvation. The New Testament interprets the Psalms in a messianic and ecclesial fashion; thus, if we are to use the Psalter rightly, we must apply it to Christ and church.

7. How can the Psalms teach us how to pray?

The Psalms reveal to us what the life of faith looks like from the inside. Sometimes when we are around great Christians, we wonder how they arrived at such maturity and intimacy with God. The Psalms, understood not only as the prayers of great saints, but as the prayers of Christ himself, give us infallible insight into the life of faith. It is not always easy: Many of the Psalms are full of struggle and pain, as the Psalmist wrestles with his Heavenly Father, as he deals with betraying friends and cruel enemies, as he works through doubts and seemingly unfulfilled promises. But the Psalms show us the way to triumph. We prevail by clinging to God even in the darkest of times, by trusting in his word, by obeying his law, and by giving him praise. The Psalms stretch us, leading us to pray for things we would not usually pray for, in ways we would not usually use, with words that may seem strange to us. And yet this is the prayer manual and hymn book God has given us to strengthen and grow us in the faith.

¹ Quoted in Ken Meyers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1989), 138. There are numerous examples of the kind of rock-driven revolution Wenner is talking about. Perhaps the most famous rock song of all, Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," explicitly describes the new age that will dawn if we will only follow the music:

And it's whispered that soon
If we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to reason
And a new day will dawn
For those who stand long
And the forests will echo with laughter.

The "piper" is probably the pagan god Pan, who was known to play the flute.

-
- ² Quoted in Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press (1998), 158-9.
- ³ Quoted in Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed (1954), 56.
- ⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, translated by James Anderson. Grand Rapids: Baker (1993 reprint), xxxvi-xxxvii.
- ⁵ Jay E. Adams' book on imprecatory Psalms goes by this title.
- ⁶ Quoted in Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2007), 58.
- ⁷ Quoted in Stapert, 151.
- ⁸ Quoted in Stapert, 163.
- ¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary of the Book of Psalms*, xxxix.
- ¹¹ James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press (1968), 38ff.
- ¹² Some scholars believe that in ancient Israel when a Psalm was sung, at the end, the singers would conclude with the doxology drawn from the end of that book in the Psalter. So, for example, if they sang Psalm 3, they would conclude it with the last verses of Psalm 41. If this is indeed the case, there are several interesting implications. For example, Psalm 88 is a Psalm of lament from beginning to end. It is perhaps the only Psalm of lamentation that never "turns" to praise and thanks at the end. It seems to conclude in despondency and despair. But if the doxology from Psalm 89 would have always been tacked on to it, it puts the entire Psalm in a new light. Also, this may be where early Christians got the notion of singing a doxology or Gloria Patri at the end of their hymns, which was a standard practice for several centuries, until it was finally reduced to a mere "Amen."
- ¹³ C. S. Lewis pointed out that parallelism is the only poetic form in the world that can be translated from one language to the next without loss. The Psalms were obviously designed by God to ultimately function as the basic hymnbook of an international, multi-lingual church. Other literary forms in the Psalter do not carry over to other languages, but they are not nearly as foundational to the structure and usage of the Psalms as parallelism.
- ¹⁴ When Psalm lines are sung alternately, it is known as "antiphon."
- ¹⁵ See David Dorsey, *Literary Structures of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker (1999), 177.
- ¹⁶ This is why J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis present the divine figure singing his creation into existence in their creation myths (in the *Silmarillion* and the *The Magician's Nephew*, respectively).
- ¹⁷ These quotations are from various places in Luther's works. For an overview of Luther's theology of music, see Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, Nashville: Abingdon (1978), 266ff, and Paul S. Jones *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey (2006), 3ff, 171ff.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Susan Haik-Ventoura, *The Music of the Bible Revealed*, San Francisco: Bibal Press (1991).
- ¹⁹ See C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace (1958).
- ²⁰ Quoted in Stapert, 196.. By "manners," Clement means one's whole course of life and conduct in the world.
- ²¹ Quoted in Stapert, 181. Sometimes Augustine sounds quite suspicious of music because of its power over the emotions. While music can be dangerous, it can also be used to encourage the right kind of feelings. See, for example, 2 Chronicles 29:30, where we find the Israelites sang until there was gladness. In this case (as in Augustine's testimony), music is used not just to express devotion but to stimulate it.
- ²² Quoted in Stapert, 195.
- ²³ Quoted in Stapert, 38.
- ²⁴ Quoted in Adams, 32.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Adams, 26-7.
- ²⁶ Charles Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed (1996), 100.
- ²⁷ There are other dimensions to the imprecatory Psalms. The judgments prayed for could include a petition that the wicked be converted. For example, in Psalm 139, David prays God would slay the wicked. But such slaying could include asking God to kill the "old man" so that the sinner is remade a "new man" (cf.

Paul's description of conversion as death of the old self and a rising to life of the new self in Romans 6-7, Galatians 2:19-20, etc.). Likewise, when Psalm 137 speaks of dashing Babylon babies against the rock, it could stretched to mean bringing children to Christ who is the Rock. But these interpretations hardly solve the problems posed by the imprecations. John N. Day, in *Crying for Justice*, Grand Rapids: Kregel (2005), sees these imprecatory prayers as cries for justice and covenant vengeance, in accord with Genesis 12:3, Deuteronomy 28-32, 1 Corinthians 16:22, Revelation 6:9-11 and other texts which describe or pronounce curses for the wicked. Day argues that believers live within a tension, simultaneously loving and hating the wicked, both blessing and cursing them. This is true, of course, but Day wrongly disconnects these prayers from the church's union with Christ, which is the essence of the covenant relationship.

²⁸ From the article "Psalm Like It Hot," available at <http://www.atu2.com/news/article.src?ID=668>.

²⁹ Eugene Peterson, *Living the Message*, San Francisco: Harper Collins (2003), 284.