CHRISTOPHER ASH

The PSALMS

A Christ-Centered Commentary

VOLUME I – INTRODUCTION

Christ and the Psalms

"These wonderful volumes on the Psalms place the whole church of Christ in their author's debt. To have carried to completion the vision of such a project is a breathtaking accomplishment. And to have done it with the author's characteristically loving and careful approach to the text of Scripture, coupled with richness of exposition, humility of spirit, and wise personal and pastoral application, stimulates our admiration and gratitude. In an era when the evangelical church in the West has, by and large, turned its back on the wisdom of two millennia of Christian praise dominated by the Psalms, these four magnificent volumes provide both the equipment and the inspiration needed to discover what our Lord and Savior himself experienced. They deserve to become—indeed, are surely destined to be—the go-to resource for multitudes of preachers, teachers, and students for decades to come. We are richer because of their publication."

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

"Since the Enlightenment, it has become fashionable to hypercontextualize the Psalms, thereby repudiating eighteen centuries of Christ-centered preaching, teaching, and scholarship. In this magisterial commentary, Christopher Ash returns to the old paths by displaying Christ and his glory in all 150 psalms. The Reformers and the Puritans would have loved this warm, devotional, and accessible work, for herein Ash provides the kind of experiential, practical, and Christ-saturated exegesis that they so dearly treasured. With careful historical-theological reflection and a tender pastoral heart, Ash guides the people of God as they seek to better read, sing, meditate on, study, and preach the Psalms. This commentary will no doubt become a staple in the pastor's library for many years to come."

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

"Modern readers often gravitate toward the Psalms because in them they see a mirror for themselves and their own emotions. This is not wrong, but as Christopher Ash reminds us, it is insufficient. The writers of the New Testament and many throughout church history read the Psalms because in them they found Christ. Ash provides a comprehensive help to the church to read the Psalms afresh from that Christ-centered perspective, in a way that not only exercises our minds but feeds our souls."

Iain M. Duguid, Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

"How easy it is to quickly read ourselves into the center of the Psalms, and yet how important it is *not* to do this. Christopher Ash can be counted on to see a psalm in its real setting, grasp its proper culmination in Christ, and tell its rich implications to us. Few writers think with as much faithfulness or illumination as Ash does, and these volumes will be the new treasure chest in learning and psalmody."

Simon Manchester, Former Rector, St. Thomas' Anglican Church, North Sydney, Australia

"In this four-volume work, Christopher Ash casts a vision of the Psalter that is theologically centered on Christ, typologically related to Christ, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ—a book of the Old Testament that reveals, in type and shadow, through image of king and priest, prophet and teacher, supplicant and sufferer, the divinity and humanity of Christ, who in his humanity perfectly expressed the full range of human emotions and affections in the vicissitudes of his earthly humiliation as he awaited his heavenly exaltation. Therefore, he is the true and better singer of the Psalter, the one through whom and in union with whom the Christian and the church today can sing 'the Psalms of Jesus' with eyes unveiled. Encyclopedic in scope, enlightening in content, enthusing in purpose—this magnum opus ought to find a place in every pastor's library, in every student's book budget, and on every Christian's bedside table. These volumes will hopefully change the way we read—and sing!—the Psalms for years to come."

Jonathan Gibson, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

"This is a landmark commentary that belongs in the library of every Bible teacher and scholar. Grounded in wide-ranging research, warmed by sincere devotion, and crafted with unusual elegance, this work offers the reader an exegetical and theological feast for both heart and mind. Any believer who has studied and taught the Psalms knows the challenge of handling them in faithfulness as truly Christian Scripture. In these pages Ash has pursued the compelling thesis that the Psalms are emphatically Christ centered from beginning to end, having Christ as their true subject and object. For those who wish to understand how and why this is so, this study is both a treasure and a delight."

Jonathan Griffiths, Lead Pastor, The Metropolitan Bible Church, Ottawa, Canada

"How pleasing it is to find a modern, scholarly commentary that unashamedly leads us to Jesus the Messiah! The case for this Christ-centered work is carefully argued and applied to each psalm without ignoring original contexts or their relevance to believers. More controversially, Christopher Ash provides the most compelling defense to date for accepting every penitential and imprecatory line in the Psalter as appropriate on the lips of the sinless Savior, the Christian's covenant head. Helpful quotations from early Christian writers, the Reformers, and contemporary authors add to the commentary's appeal. I warmly recommend it."

Philip H. Eveson, Former Principal and Old Testament Tutor, London Seminary; author, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*

"To simply call this resource a commentary seems too mundane. What Christopher Ash presents us with here is an extensive and detailed exploration of the verdant theological landscape of the Psalter, with Jesus the Messiah as the lodestar. These remarkable volumes are weighty but not burdensome, erudite but not arid. Ash's pastoral insights into the Psalms reflect a maturity and wisdom that can be cultivated only over a lifetime spent in the full counsel of Scripture and ministry in the church. What a tremendous achievement this is, what a blessing it is sure to be to the church, and what a testament to the beauty and transforming power of the true and final King, Jesus Christ."

William A. Ross, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

"With historical breadth, exegetical finesse, rhetorical care, and a deeply doxological thrust, Christopher Ash's commentary brings the Psalms closer to the center of Christian devotion—and Jesus Christ to the very center of the Psalter. These wonderful volumes have helped me grasp, more deeply than ever before, just why Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms an 'incomparable treasure.' More than that, they have revealed the incomparable treasure himself who sings in every psalm yet whose voice we so often fail to hear."

Scott Hubbard, Editor, Desiring God; Pastor, All Peoples Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

"This new commentary—in which 'the person of Christ is central to the meaning and force of every psalm'—is theologically rich, spiritually refreshing, and carefully assembled to understand Old and New Testament themes in the light of Christ. Here is a commentary that will be rewarding in the study as the minister prepares to teach the Psalms or, indeed, the many New Testament passages that reference them. This is also great material for personal devotions. Thank you, Christopher Ash, for such a rich resource to help us know Christ."

Nat Schluter, Principal, Johannesburg Bible College

"A masterful balance of being thoughtfully Christ centered and warmly devotional at the same time. A blessing for my personal quiet time and my sermon preparation."

Denesh Divyanathan, Senior Pastor, The Crossing Church, Singapore; Chairman, Evangelical Theological College of Asia; President, Project Timothy Singapore

The Psalms

A Christ-Centered Commentary

Other Crossway Books by Christopher Ash

The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience, coauthored with Steve Midgley (2021)

Job: The Wisdom of the Cross (2014)

Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be (2016)

Trusting God in the Darkness: A Guide to Understanding the Book of Job (2021)

The Psalms

A Christ-Centered Commentary

VOLUME 1
INTRODUCTION: CHRIST AND THE PSALMS

Christopher Ash

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To Tyndale House, Cambridge,
a fellowship of delight
in the Scriptures (Ps. 1:2).

Jesus, my shepherd, brother, friend,
my prophet, priest, and king,
my Lord, my life, my way, my end,
accept the praise I bring.

JOHN NEWTON
"How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds"

Contents

PREFACE

TWO CONVICTIONS UNDERLIE this commentary: that the Psalms are essential to the life of the Christian church and that Christ is central to the Psalms.

In the preface to his book *Interpreting the Psalms*, Patrick Miller (1935–2020) expresses the first sentiment like this: "It is in the conviction that the psalms belong both at the center of the life and worship of Christian congregations and in the midst of the personal pilgrimage that each of us makes under the shadow of the Almighty, that I have written this book."[1] I share this conviction. It ought not to be controversial, although the Psalms have sometimes been marginalized in church life today. I want to add my voice to others calling the church to bring them back into the mainstream of both corporate worship and personal devotion.

The second conviction is that Christ is central to the Psalms. This is a Christ-centered commentary in which Christ is front and center in each psalm and in all the Psalms. Every word of the Psalms is ours in Christ but always and only in Christ, to whom the Psalms preeminently belong. The Puritan Thomas Adams (1583–1652) writes that Jesus Christ is "the sum of the whole Bible, prophesied, typified, prefigured, exhibited, demonstrated, to be found in every leaf, almost in every line, the Scriptures being but as it were the swaddling bands of the child Jesus."[2] I believe this is emphatically true of the Psalms. I am persuaded that the Psalms belong to Jesus Christ and cannot rightly be understood apart from him. The main purpose of this introductory volume is to explain my approach and outline a defense for reading the Psalms this way.

1 Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), vii.

2 Thomas Adams, *Works* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), 3:224.

For the larger part of church history, this has broadly been the way Christians have read the Psalms (see part 3, "Christian History and the Psalms"). The Christian tradition of concluding the singing of a psalm with the "Gloria Patri" ("Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen") expresses the ancient Christian conviction that the Psalms are—in their original and enduring meaning—deeply Christian poems.[3]

But since the so-called "Enlightenment," Christ has been eclipsed in much Psalms scholarship and preaching.[4] With a few notable exceptions, recent commentaries tend either to omit Christ from many or all of the Psalms or to mention him as little more than an afterthought. But like an adventurer planting a flag in occupied territory, I want to reclaim the Psalms for Christ. Much more needs to be done. Scholars need to argue their way, yard by yard, across this occupied realm, claimed both by Judaism (as part of the Hebrew Scriptures, with Christ denied) and by the Old Testament academy (in various ways, with Christ at best on the margins). But in this commentary I want to do something else, something that may seem eccentric, even doomed to failure. I want to set before us what the Psalms might look and feel like, how they might be read and appropriated, if in truth they do belong to Christ—and to argue that they do.

For I have become persuaded that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of the Psalms, that his majestic divine-human person is woven into the warp and woof of the Psalter, and that he is the preeminent singer of psalms, the focus of the Psalter, and the one without whom the Psalms cannot be understood aright.[5] I hope therefore to place Christ in the foreground of our reading of every psalm and to do so in ways that are shaped by the New Testament.

3 Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 159.

4 For example, in David Howard's clear and fair 1999 overview of "Recent Trends in Psalms Study," one short paragraph in forty pages mentions Christological approaches. David M. Howard Jr., "Recent Trends in Psalms Study," in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 360.

5 For a popular-level introduction to a Christ-centered reading of the Psalms, I recommend Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010).

In arguing for a Christ-centered reading, I have occasionally been misheard as if I were suggesting that individual Christians cannot pray the Psalms. Far from it! This misunderstanding can arise because I draw attention to problems that arise when an individual believer seeks to refer a psalm directly to himself or herself and because I seek to emphasize how Jesus Christ prays the Psalms. The endpoint for which I argue, however, is that we may and must appropriate the Psalms for ourselves, both individually and corporately, but that we may only legitimately do so as men and women in Christ. If we are outside Christ, the Psalms are not mine or yours to appropriate; if we are in Christ, every word is our birthright as children of God the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, men and women indwelt with the Spirit of Christ.

I write as an amateur in the professional world of biblical studies and am deeply conscious of the shortcomings of my work. For the Psalms are difficult. Both Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) express this awareness well.

"I confess frankly," Luther said when he gave his *First Lectures on the Psalms*, "that even to the present day I do not understand many psalms."[6] In the preface to his comments on Psalms 1–22 (1519–1521), he writes,

> I do not want anyone to suppose that I shall accomplish what none of the most holy and learned theologians have ever accomplished before, namely, to understand and teach the correct meaning of the Psalter in all particulars. It is enough to have understood some of the psalms, and those only in part. The Spirit reserves much for Himself, so that we may always remain His pupils. There is much that He reveals only to lure us on, much that He gives only to stir us up. . . . I know that a person would be guilty of the most shameless boldness if he dared claim that he had understood even one book of the Scriptures in all its parts. In fact, who would even dare assert that anyone had completely understood one single psalm?[7]

In the author's preface to his Psalms commentary, Calvin writes, "The varied and resplendid [*sic*] riches which are contained in this treasury it

6 Luther, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 10:8.

7 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14:284–85.

is no easy matter to express in words; so much so, that I well know that whatever I shall be able to say will be far from approaching the excellence of the subject."[8]

What was true for Luther and Calvin is far more applicable to me. There is much you will not find in this commentary. I am a preacher and pastor rather than a trained biblical scholar. I have sought to interact with a representative sample of writers across the centuries but have not, for the most part, attempted to interact with the voluminous and ever-growing secondary literature.[9] Even in the sixteenth century, Luther could observe that "in many places the interpretations [i.e., of the Psalms] seem to require more interpretation than the text itself."[10] How much more today! I hope I am sufficiently aware of the more significant debates, but for a full study of these things, readers should consult one or more of the recent technical commentaries.

I have worked from the Hebrew text but have no particular expertise in the language, especially as regards Hebrew poetry, translation of tense forms, and poetic parallelism.[11] Much scholarly debate surrounds theories of the dating, possible contexts of origins, and putative redaction histories of psalms. Too often, it seems to me that scholars construct theories on the basis of inadequate evidence; furthermore, I am not persuaded that these debates are always useful to Christian disciples seeking to weave the Psalms into their lives of prayer and praise. This commentary is not, therefore, a substitute for technical, scholarly commentaries. What you will find here,

8 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 1:xxxvi.

9 Like Calvin, "I have also generally abstained from refuting the opinions of others" and have not "heaped together a great mass of materials." Calvin, *Psalms*, 1:xlix. And for the Psalms, there is indeed "a great mass of materials" available. On the library shelves rests a two-volume work, more than nine hundred pages in length, consisting entirely and solely of a bibliography of writings on the Psalms in the twentieth century alone; see Thorne Wittstruck, *The Book of Psalms: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols., Books of the Bible 5 (New York: Garland, 1994).

10 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 10:8.

11 For significant contributions to debates about structures and parallelism, see Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); J. P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols., SSN (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1998–2004). For helpful reflections on translating Hebrew poetry, see Andrew G. Shead, "Theology in Poetry: The Challenge of Translating the Psalms," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 133–57.

I hope, is the Psalter read with the breadth of a whole-Bible perspective and with a clear focus on Christ, the center of history and the fulcrum of the Bible story.[12] Whether or not you are persuaded by every detail of my approach, I hope that this introductory volume whets your appetite to grapple with the commentary psalm by psalm and—far more importantly—to immerse yourself afresh in the Psalms themselves, in the presence of the God who so generously gave them to us.

12 Those who wish to learn something about the possible ancient Near Eastern background to the Psalms are referred to Tremper Longman III, "Psalms: Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 593–605.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE PSALMS began to develop when teaching courses on Old Testament poetry at the Proclamation Trust's Cornhill Training Course in London, where I served as director from 2004 to 2015. Poetry metamorphosed into a course specifically on the Psalms. I owe much to these generations of lively and thoughtful students. Their responses and questions helped me more than they can have realized. My colleagues at the Proclamation Trust over those years were to me as iron sharpening iron, especially Stuart Allen, Jonathan Griffiths, David Jackman, Dick Lucas, Tim McMahon, Adrian Reynolds, Robin Sydserff, Tim Ward, and Robin Weekes. A golden thread of excellent administrators, including Beckie Hollands, Katy Jones-Parry, Christine Mulryne, Erica Tapp, and Nikki Tomkins, provided invaluable support and much wise advice.

In 2008 I published a devotional study on Psalm 119.[1] Gradually, I came to see that a Christ-centered reading made sense and in 2017 and 2018 published *Teaching Psalms*, in which volume 1 was my first attempt at sketching out the salient features of such a reading, and volume 2 a brief suggestion for a Christ-centered reading of each psalm in turn.[2] Then in 2020 I published *Psalms for You*, a popular-level, Christ-centered exposition of thirty-two selected psalms.[3] I am grateful to Christian Focus Publications and the Good Book Company for permission to use or adapt material from these books.

1 Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God; Psalm 119 for the Bible Teacher and Bible Hearer* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008).

2 Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms: From Text to Message*, 2 vols. (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017–2018).

3 Christopher Ash, *Psalms for You: How to Pray, How to Feel, and How to Sing* (Epsom, UK: Good Book, 2020).

In all these publications I am sure I both oversimplified and overstated some of the points I was trying to make. So I was grateful when Justin Taylor at Crossway generously agreed to my proposal to try to flesh this out more fully and in a more nuanced manner. These volumes are the fruit of that attempt.

"Imagine you are called upon to write a commentary on the Psalms," writes one British scholar, voicing sentiments I share. "You soon discover that not only is 150 a large number, but also that there are many difficult issues to face. Each psalm poses its own questions."[4] How very true! There have been times when I have come close to abandoning the project. That I have completed it is a testimony to the grace of God and also to the help of many along the way.

I have lost count of the gracious opportunities I have had to teach and preach from the Psalms over the years, including in many churches. Notable have been seminaries or conferences for those in ministry, including the Evangelical Ministry Assembly in London, "The Basics" in Ohio, Queensland Theological College in Brisbane, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where I was privileged to give the Gheens Lectures in fall 2019. Our years at Christ Church Mayfair in London were a precious time of fellowship, and I am thankful for the friendship and steady encouragement of the senior minister, Matt Fuller, and his wife, Ceri.

Most of the writing of these volumes has been done in the wonderful context of Tyndale House, Cambridge (www.tyndalehouse.com), where I have been privileged to be writer in residence since 2015. I have dedicated these volumes to the fellowship of people there, and I owe much to the encouragement and expertise of scholars and others on staff, including Peter Williams, principal; Dirk Jongkind and Simon Sykes, vice principals; and fellow researchers James Bejon, Caleb Howard, Kaspars Ozolins, and Kim Phillips. I have also been encouraged by many visiting scholars at Tyndale House, including Diego Alves, Benedict Bird, John F. Evans, Tom Habib, Philip Johnston, Andrew Keenan, O. Palmer Robertson, Howard Spencer, and Luke Wisley.

4 John H. Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: A Conference with Commentators*, JSOTSup 199 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 9.

Many other scholars and pastors have helped and encouraged me. Notable among these are John Woodhouse, whose expositions of various psalms brought a Christ-centered approach back into the mainstream for many in my circles, and James Hely Hutchinson, who has given many kind and expert suggestions and prayed faithfully for my writing. Others include Sam Ashton, Alistair Begg, Philip Eveson, Sinclair Ferguson, Gary Millar, Andrew Saville, Matt Searles, Mark Smith, and Garry Williams. Of recent commentaries, I have particularly appreciated those by Philip Eveson and James M. Hamilton Jr.[5]

I owe a personal debt to good friends, including prayer partners Nigel Beynon and Stephen Moore while in London, and Diego Alves, Caleb Howard, and Andrew Keenan at Tyndale House. Nick Grant has supplied me with a steady and welcome flow of freshly roasted coffee beans. I am grateful to Alasdair Paine, my senior pastor since 2015, who has guarded my calendar and given me unflagging encouragement to persevere in the work. Precious prayer partners have prayed faithfully in response to our prayer letters; it would be impossible to exaggerate how much this project owes its completion to God's answers to their many prayers.

I owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Crossway, first to Justin Taylor, for encouraging me to take on this project, and then to David Barshinger, my patient and painstaking editor, who has lavished his skill and attention on the project for many, many hours and without whom the end result would be incomparably worse than it is.

Although our sons and daughter had left home before the main writing of this commentary, I am grateful to them and their spouses and our grandchildren for putting up with Grandpa's preoccupation with what must have seemed a strange project over the years. But my greatest debt under God is to Carolyn, my dear wife of more than forty years, my dearest friend, and my daily partner in prayer. Her kindness, patience, love, and encouragement have been and remain the bedrock of my life in Christ.

CHRISTOPHER ASH
Cambridge, England, 2023

5 Philip Eveson, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*, 2 vols., WCS (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2014–2015); James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, 2 vols., EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021).

OVERVIEW

THE INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER ("Why Bother with the Psalms?") seeks to tease out just why and how the Psalms are God's means of blessing Christ's people. I begin with a study of the two New Testament verses that speak explicitly about the Psalms in corporate worship (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). I move from there to indications in the contexts in Ephesians and Colossians of some of the major ways in which the Psalms bring blessing, finishing with some wider observations from older writers about how these blessings may be expected to multiply.

Part 1 ("Christ and the Psalms") sketches out the heart of my argument for a Christ-centered commentary. I seek to do this first by moving forward from the Psalter to Christ; chapter 1 outlines some characteristics of the Psalter that—in my view—cry out for a completion found perfectly only in Christ. I take the superscriptions to be reliable indicators of authorship and context. Since this is a minority position in contemporary scholarship, I have summarized my reasoning for so doing in appendix 1. Then in chapters 2 and 3, I move, as it were, backward from Christ to the Psalms. I study how the New Testament writers quoted and echoed the psalms, seeking to find patterns and norms to guide the commentary. Chapter 2 discusses the method, and chapter 3 summarizes the conclusions. Appendix 2 gives a table of New Testament quotations and at least some of the echoes.

In part 2 ("Doctrine and the Psalms") I offer seven brief essays seeking to relate the Psalms to various areas of Christian doctrine. Chapter 4 sketches out some principles for interpretation and highlights how interpretation and worship ought to be inseparable. In chapter 5 I relate biblical convictions about the God of prophecy to the Psalms. I especially consider what prophecy means when it consists of words spoken not simply to people

from God but to God from people: what does it mean for the text of the Psalms to be at the same time the words of men and women spoken to God in prayer and praise *and* the inspired words of God for us? Chapter 6 moves to a biblical theology of prayer and praise as it affects the Psalms. It considers what it means for Christ to be not only our prophet but also our priest, through whom we pray and praise. In chapter 7 I try very briefly to relate biblical convictions about the divine-human person of Christ to the Psalms, especially probing what it means for Christ in his perfect humanity to experience and feel the Psalms. In chapter 8 I ask what righteousness means in the Psalms, who the righteous people are, and how their righteousness relates to Christ the Righteous One. Chapters 9 and 10 address two critical issues for any understanding that sees Jesus as praying some or all of the Psalms. Chapter 9 asks whether Jesus Christ can pray words of penitence in the Psalms and, if so, what this can mean on the lips of the sinless Son of God. Chapter 10 faces the question of the so-called imprecations—the many times in the Psalms when the psalmists pray for God to judge the wicked—and asks what difference it might make if Jesus actually prays these sometimes shocking prayers.

Part 3 ("Christian History and the Psalms") shifts the focus from Scripture to history. In chapter 11 I consider what place Christian tradition can rightly have in biblical interpretation. Then, after some introductory remarks about how Christians have read the Psalms (chap. 12), I sketch some salient features from the patristic period (chap. 13), the medieval era (chap. 14), and the Renaissance and Reformation periods (chap. 15). Chapter 16 touches very briefly on some trends from the Reformation to the present day before offering a summary conclusion from Christian history. Appendix 3 gives a concise table of older writers quoted, focusing mainly on those before the twentieth century. Part 3 is, of course, woefully inadequate as an attempt to summarize a gargantuan body of source material, quite apart from failing to consider traditions of Jewish interpretation and, more recently, various secular approaches. Nevertheless, I hope this very concise survey is of some value in helping us see our Psalms interpretation in a wider historical context.

Finally, in the conclusion I try to pull the main threads together and suggest the outline of a Christian reading of the Psalms. The three volumes of commentary (volumes 2, 3, and 4) attempt to put this approach into practice.

Many commentaries begin with an exegesis of the text and then conclude (if they are more or less conservative Christian commentaries) with some reflections about the meaning or implication of the psalm today in the light of Christ. I am persuaded that Christ is so integral and central to the meaning itself (the original meaning) that the exegesis cannot accurately be done without first considering how we should orient ourselves to the psalm in the light of Christ. I have therefore structured my treatment of each psalm as follows.

Orientation. After a few (usually older) quotations (epigraphs) opposite the opening page, I begin with an *orientation* section that aims to ask how the psalm "lines up" in the light of Christ and therefore how we ourselves ought to line up our strategy for understanding it. To this end, I consider New Testament quotations and echoes, together with the overall perspective of the New Testament, and ask what light these shed on a particular psalm. This section aims to prepare the reader to engage in a Christ-focused appropriation, placing Christ at the center rather than setting him on the periphery or treating him as an afterthought.

Text. I consider structure only briefly and cautiously, seeking to point to clear structural markers but remaining agnostic where there is no consensus (as is often the case). My structures are provisional. In particular, I find chiastic structures only rarely persuasive. In the *text* section, I provide verse-by-verse commentary, and my aim is to discern the flow and meaning of the psalm not only in its original context but as it is fully understood in Christ.

Reflection and response. After working through the text, I append some notes on response, suggesting some of the ways in which we might rightly respond to the psalm as we appropriate it for Christian use, both in private devotion and in corporate worship. If we do not reach the place where we can sing, pray, hear, and praise with the Psalter, all the hermeneutics in the world will have achieved nothing of value.

In structuring the commentary in this way, I hope to move away from commentaries in which Christ is omitted altogether, from those in which Christ is marginal to the reading or entirely tangential to the force of the psalm, and from those in which he is merely illustrative of what is said in the psalm. In my understanding, the person of Christ is central to the meaning and force of every psalm, which cannot rightly be understood apart from him. To read a psalm without discerning this is, it seems to me,

like taking a burning coal or log away from the heart of the fire; it leads, at best, to spiritually lukewarm readings. Since the Psalms are so central to Christian devotion and the corporate devotion of the church (and indeed to its evangelism and witness in life), it is of great importance that we learn afresh how to read and appropriate the Psalms in these ways.

CONVENTIONS

Texts and Translations

I have followed the normal Jewish and Christian understanding that the Masoretic Text is the most reliable witness to the original form of the texts. Some modern translations give considerable weight to the Greek translations (and sometimes also to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ancient Versions), but I have erred on the side of caution, except where there are overwhelming reasons for rejecting the Masoretic Text. I have indicated where there is significant uncertainty. But for the most part, I have not engaged with the text-critical questions raised either by the Septuagint or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Such questions are significant when the New Testament quotes from the Septuagint and the Septuagint differs in some substantial way from the Masoretic Text; in these (few) cases, I have offered some discussion in the commentary.

While suggested repointing of Hebrew vowels is not especially problematic, I have been reluctant to do so unless there seems strong reason. Consonantal emendation is far more serious, and I have not considered this except where there seems to be an overwhelming need for it. Some scholars seem to me too "trigger-happy" in embracing emendations, including when they wish to tidy up the metrical patterns of psalm lines.[1]

When quoting Hebrew or Greek, I provide both the original forms and the transliteration in the main text. In footnotes I provide only the original Hebrew or Greek. Where a Hebrew word is rare (or a hapax legomenon), I have offered some discussion of translation options.

1 A commentator who seems to me to do this often is Hans-Joachim Kraus (1918–2000), *Psalms*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, 2 vols., CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

I have used the English Standard Version (ESV) as my base text (though I have at times taken liberty to break stanzas differently from the ESV). I have found this an admirable translation for the purposes of detailed study. Where there are significant differences, I have sometimes referred to the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), the King James Version (KJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), or the Revised English Bible (REB).

Hebrew Tense Forms

Scholars vary in the terminology they use for the two tense forms in Hebrew. One form may be called the perfect, the perfective, the suffix conjugation, or the *qatal*. The other may be called the imperfect, the imperfective, the prefix conjugation, or the *yiqtol*. For simplicity I use the traditional terminology *perfect* and *imperfect*, even though these do not translate simply into English perfect or imperfect tenses, especially in poetry. In general, it may be true that an imperfect form conveys an action that is continuing (typically but not always future), while a perfect form indicates an action that is completed (typically but not always past). But there are many exceptions (especially when following the *vav consecutive*).

The Divine Name "the LORD"

The Hebrew name יהוה, or *YHWH*, often written *Yahweh* and sometimes called the tetragrammaton (after its four consonants), is written "LORD" in quotations from the biblical text (in line with the usual convention for English translations). Outside quotations, I prefer to use the phrases *covenant Lord* or *covenant God*, rather than the word *Yahweh*, partly because we do not know for sure how it was pronounced but mainly because it captures the strong Old Testament context of covenantal lordship.

The Davidic King

When speaking of the Davidic king/King, I have generally capitalized *King* to encourage the reader to think toward the fulfillment of Davidic kingship in Christ, the final King. I have used the lowercase *king* only when referring exclusively to an old covenant king, whether David or one of his successors.

Psalm Numbering

I have numbered the Psalms according to the Masoretic Text and all English translations throughout. Most patristic writers followed the Psalm chapter numbering in, or derived from, the Greek translations. This numbering differs from the Hebrew numbering as shown in table 1. So, for example, when commenting on what our English Bibles call Psalm 107, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) refers to it as Psalm 106. But even when referring to the Septuagint or Vulgate, I have translated into the Masoretic Text numbering.

Table 1 Psalm Numbering in English and Greek Versions

Psalm Number in English Versions	Psalm Number in Greek Versions
Pss. 1–8	Unchanged: Pss. 1–8
Pss. 9–10	Combined into Ps. 9
Pss. 11–113	One less: Pss. 10–112
Pss. 114–115	Combined into Ps. 113
Ps. 116	Split into Pss. 114 and 115
Pss. 117–146	One less: Pss. 116–145
Ps. 147	Split into Pss. 146 and 147
Pss. 148–150	Unchanged: Pss. 148–150

Verse Numbering

I have used English verse numbering throughout, with superscriptions labeled *S*. Where a psalm has more than a very short superscription, the Masoretic Text usually designates the superscription verse 1, increasing all subsequent verse numbers by one. Otherwise, the superscription forms the start of verse 1. I have noted this feature when commenting on each superscription.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACCS	*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Edited by Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998–2010.
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AD	*anno Domini*, "in the year of the Lord," often called the Common Era, CE
ANF	*Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
BC	before Christ, sometimes called BCE, before the Common Era
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHQ	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta*
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
BRLJ	Brill Reference Library of Judaism
ca.	*circa*, "approximately"
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CC	Continental Commentaries
CCT	Contours of Christian Theology
CFTL	Clark's Foreign Theological Library
chap(s).	chapter(s)
CNTOT	*Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CTHPT	Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
ECF	Early Church Fathers
e.g.	*exempli gratia*, "for example"
esp.	especially
ET	English translation
etc.	*et cetera*, "and so forth"
FC	Fathers of the Church
FOET	Foundations of Evangelical Theology
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
LEChr	Library of Early Christology
lit.	literally
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures)
MC	A Mentor Commentary
MT	Masoretic Text
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NPNF^2	*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 2nd ser. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 1890–1900. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
OWC	Oxford World's Classics
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
RCS	*Reformation Commentary on Scripture*. Edited by Timothy George and Scott M. Manetsch. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011–.

SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
s.v.	*sub verbo*, "under the word"
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
TBST	The Bible Speaks Today
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TT	*Theology Today*
Vg.	Vulgate (Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible)
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBBC	Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Introduction

CHRIST AND THE PSALMS

Introduction

WHY BOTHER WITH THE PSALMS?

"I READ THE PSALMS EVERY DAY as I have done for years," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) to his parents from prison in May 1943. "I know them and love them more than any other book."[1] A little earlier in his life he wrote, "Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure is lost to the Christian church. With its recovery will come unexpected power."[2] The aim of this chapter is to explore why he was right. In the preface I suggested that the Psalms are essential to the life of the Christian church. Now I want to argue and develop this conviction and to set before us some of the overflowing blessings that are to be found when the church is soaked in the Psalms. It is wise to consider the broad benefits of the Psalms before embarking on the main argument of this volume, which is that only a Christ-centered reading can do justice to the true meaning of the Psalms.

Why should we bother with the Psalms? That may sound a foolish, even impious, question. Before embarking on a rather long commentary, I certainly needed to ask this question. For most of Christian history, it scarcely needed asking, for the Psalter has been woven into the warp and woof of Christian corporate worship since the very earliest days—and in old

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1971), 40.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, in *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 162.

covenant Israel before that.[3] But today the Psalms are perhaps more often paid lip service as a great book of the Bible than actually used regularly, at least in many churches.

It is possible to study the Psalms simply as students of literature or of the history of Israel's religion. No doubt, there is value in that exploration, and it is of interest to some. But this is not my goal. My aim is that every Christian minister should lead each congregation not only in studying but in appropriating all the Psalms in both corporate worship and individual devotion.

Perhaps the most common reason people might bother with the Psalms today is because they make us feel better. We find them inspiring, beautiful, and uplifting, especially when we select the parts that do not offend or challenge us. We love to pick and choose the verses that sound comforting. When ministers plan a summer holiday preaching series with visiting preachers, they sometimes say to them, "Pick your favorite Psalm and preach that. People will love what is precious to you." And yet it may be that what we really love is not the Psalms as a whole but just our favorite psalms—or even our treasured nuggets from the Psalms.

In his fascinating essay "How the Twenty-Third Psalm Became an American Secular Icon,"[4] William Holladay observes that part of the cultural appeal of Psalm 23 is that it is—on the face of it—"undemanding. It does not mention sin or suggest the appropriateness of participating in any ecclesial community. It simply seems to affirm that God (or, alternatively, Jesus) accompanies the speaker and takes care of him or her."[5] This understanding is, as my commentary seeks to show, a misreading of the psalm, but it is easy to see how it can be misread that way. It is easy to read a sentimentalized subset of extracts from the Psalms rather than the Psalms as a whole. In chapter 16 I note the roots of such a romantic, purely aesthetic, or sentimental reading in trends in nineteenth-century German "higher" criticism.[6] Even among those who are Reformed and evangelical, when someone says to me, "I love the Psalms," I sometimes have a lingering misgiving that this

3 See, for example, the historical studies in William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

4 Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 359–71.

5 Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 364.

6 See "Romanticist Subjectivism," in chap. 16, p. 261.

may be a love shaped—perhaps more than the person realizes—by this romantic tradition. This is not the answer I want to give to the question "Why bother with the Psalms?"

I want to address the question "Why bother to weave the Psalms (all the Psalms) into our regular patterns of corporate worship and private prayer and praise?" For by "praying the Psalms," I do not mean "praying *from* the Psalms." To pray *from* the Psalms can mean to pick and choose some parts of the Psalms as a resource for prayer. We might call this the "calendar verse" approach: we read a Psalm and see if any of it resonates with our experience and warms our hearts; if it does, we choose that verse to put on a devotional calendar. January: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." February: "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." And so on. This may make us feel better, but if this is all we do, it lacks integrity. It places us in charge since our selections are governed by our tastes.

In addressing the question "Why bother with the Psalms?" I begin with the two places in the New Testament where it is assumed that the Psalms are a part of Christian corporate worship. After that I broaden out to suggest a vista of rich blessings that God sets before us through the Psalms. I hope we can then embark on the body of this volume persuaded that Bonhoeffer was not exaggerating when he spoke of the "incomparable treasure" and "unexpected power" of the Psalms.

The New Testament Assumes That Churches Will Speak the Psalms (Eph. 5:18–20; Col. 3:16–17)

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul tells the church to

> be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 5:18–20)

In the parallel passage in Colossians, he writes,

> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*,

> with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:16–17)

Although these exhortations appear only in Ephesians and Colossians, there is no reason to suppose that Paul writes this as a particular or occasional word just to these churches at that time because they particularly needed to hear this exhortation, as if other churches need not bother. He simply assumes that this practice characterizes a healthy church, much as his teaching about the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians assumes that every church remembers the Lord's death in this way.

What Are "Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs"?

What does Paul mean by the repeated phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"? The three nouns "psalm," "hymn," and "song" are used in ancient nonbiblical Greek and would have been understood in wider culture outside the Christian church as fairly general designations of music and songs. But the most significant background for many Greek words in the New Testament is the usage of those words in the Septuagint, which was the most commonly used Bible of the church in the apostolic age. If believers who knew—or were getting to know—the Septuagint heard the phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," what would they most naturally think of?

Psalm. The Greek word ψαλμός, *psalmos*, originally meant plucking the string of a bow, hence the playing of a stringed instrument.[7] It occurs seventy-nine times[8] in the canonical books of the Septuagint. Of these, sixty-five translate one of the classifications in the headings of the Psalms (most commonly but not exclusively מִזְמוֹר, *mizmor*);[9] five occur in the main text of the Psalms to refer either to musical instruments or to songs of

7 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 708.

8 All the statistics for these three words are based on searches using Accordance Bible Software. While there may be slight differences between variant LXX texts (and the versions of Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus), the overall picture that I paint will, I think, stand. I have omitted occurrences of these words in the extracanonical books of the Greek Bible.

9 מִזְמוֹר occurs forty-two times. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 708–9.

praise or melody (Pss. 71:22; 81:2; 95:2; 98:5; 147:1); two refer to David as the preeminent psalm singer (1 Sam. 16:18; 2 Sam. 23:1); two occur in Job to refer to a musical instrument (Job 21:12; 30:31); one refers in Lamentations to a taunt song (Lam. 3:14); another refers in Lamentations to music, presumably associated with music for the now-destroyed temple (Lam. 5:14); and three occur in the Prophets, in each case associated with temple worship or sacrifice (Isa. 66:20; Amos 5:23; Zech. 6:14 [only in LXX]). So the overwhelming majority of uses of the word in the canonical books of the Septuagint refer to or are intimately associated with the book of Psalms.

Apart from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the word ψαλμός, *psalmos*, appears five times in the New Testament. Luke uses the word four times in Luke-Acts, each time referring to the Old Testament Psalms. In Luke 20:42, Jesus mentions "the Book of Psalms"; in Luke 24:44, he speaks of "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms," in which "the Psalms" means the book of Psalms, taken as a common shorthand (*pars pro toto*) for "the Writings," the third section of the Hebrew Scriptures; in Acts 1:20, Peter refers to "the Book of Psalms"; and in Acts 13:33, Paul quotes from "the second Psalm."[10] The only other New Testament reference is in 1 Corinthians 14:26, where, when the believers "come together, each one has a hymn" (where "hymn" translates ψαλμός, *psalmos*). We do not know whether this was a fresh song, perhaps written by the believer, or simply an Old Testament psalm.

Weighing the evidence for the biblical use of the word ψαλμός, *psalmos*, both in the Septuagint and in the New Testament, we find that the most natural understanding is that "psalms" in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 simply refers to the Old Testament book of Psalms.

Hymn. The word ὕμνος, *hymnos*, in classical Greek means "generally poetic material that is either recited or sung, many times in praise of divinity or in honor of one of the gods."[11] In the canonical Old Testament books of the Septuagint, the word occurs fourteen times. At least six of these translate a designation in the superscription of a psalm, one summarizes the psalms of David in books 1 and 2 ("prayers," Ps. 72:20), four occur in the main text

10 Although some manuscripts read "first Psalm," the reading "second Psalm" is better attested.

11 Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 708–9.

of psalms, two occur in historical books referring back to the institution of psalmody by David (2 Chron. 7:6; Neh. 12:46), and one occurs in Isaiah ("a new song," Isa. 42:10). Apart from (possibly) the Isaiah reference, all the uses are associated with the Old Testament book of Psalms.

In the New Testament, the noun ὕμνος, *hymnos*, comes only in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. The verbal form of the word (ὑμνέω, *hymneō*, "to sing a hymn") occurs in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, where it is generally thought to refer to one of the Hallel psalms. In Acts 16:25 this verb is used of what Paul and Silas sing in prison overnight. We do not know what they sang; it is not unlikely that it was a biblical psalm. The last example of the verb is in Hebrews 2:12, where it comes in a quotation from Psalm 22:22. So three of these four clearly refer to Old Testament psalms, and the fourth may too.

So again, as with the term "psalms," the dominant association of the word ὕμνος, *hymnos*, is the Old Testament book of Psalms.

Song. The word translated "song" (ᾠδη, *ōdē*, from which we get our English word *ode*) occurs sixty-eight times in the canonical books of the Septuagint. Eight of these are used of inspired songs embedded in Old Testament narrative (once in Ex. 15:1 of the Song of Moses, six times in Deuteronomy 31–32 of another song of Moses, and once in Judg. 5:12 of the song of Deborah). Thirty-seven occurrences translate designations of psalms (including twelve in parallel with ψαλμός, *psalmos*; fifteen in the phrase "a Song of Ascents"; one translating "Higgaion" in Ps. 9:16 and one "Shigionoth" in the heading to the psalm of Hab. 3); seven occur in the main text of Psalms; two occur in 2 Samuel (2 Sam. 6:5, of the songs sung as David brought the ark into Jerusalem, and 2 Sam. 22:1, which becomes Ps. 18); twelve appear in 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, in connection with temple worship; and two refer to Solomon's songs (1 Kings 4:32; 8:53 [only in LXX]). Although the word can be used quite generally of song or music, the overwhelming association in the Septuagint is with the book of Psalms and the temple worship.

Apart from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the New Testament uses of the word ᾠδη, *ōdē*, all come in three places in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 5:9 "a new song" introduces the song of Revelation 5:9–10. In Revelation 14:3 the word appears twice, but the words of the

song are not given. In Revelation 15:3 it again occurs twice, describing a song that references "the song of Moses" (Ex. 15 and perhaps Deut. 32) and also alludes to Psalm 86.

Psalm, hymn, and song together. In addition, it is worth noting that the three words "psalm," "hymn," and "song" occur in close proximity only twice in the Septuagint, once in the superscription of Psalm 67[12] and once in the superscription of Psalm 76.[13] G. K. Beale suggests that in Paul's phrase, "the allusion is to both [these] psalms [i.e., Pss. 67; 76] as representing the whole corpus of psalms."[14] He argues this point also from the links between the content of these psalms and the context in Colossians, concluding,

> All of this points to the three terms in Col. 3:16 referring to actual OT psalms or songs/hymns composed on the basis of such psalms, which would now be related to the new revelation of Christ. . . . The OT psalms are now viewed to be the very word of Christ! The psalms should now be understood fully through the lens of Christ.[15]

Spiritual. The adjective "spiritual" (πνευματικός, *pneumatikos*) is generally—and probably rightly—taken in its full sense of "from the Spirit."[16] These are songs given to the church by the Holy Spirit.

In Greek the feminine adjective (πνευματικαῖς, *pneumatikais*) agrees grammatically with the closest noun, the feminine noun ᾠδη, *ōdē*, rather than the masculine nouns ψαλμός, *psalmos*, and ὕμνος, *hymnos*. This is why the phrase is generally translated "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," with the adjective qualifying the songs. So it may be that the psalms and hymns are well known to be "of the Spirit," whereas because the word "song" is often used more generally of secular singing, Paul feels the need to add the adjective "spiritual" to make sure his readers understand that the songs he refers to are from the Holy Spirit.

12 ἐν ὕμνοις· ψαλὸς ᾠδης.

13 ἐν ὕμνοις· ψαλμὸς τῷ Ασαφ, ᾠδη.

14 G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 304.

15 Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 305–6.

16 Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 511.

As Ernest Best (1917–2004) argues, however, the word ᾠδη, *ōdē*, is already used of sacred singing in the Greek Old Testament without the need for a qualifying adjective, and partly for this reason, most commentators take the adjective as referring semantically to all three nouns. Best writes, "The adjective is . . . to be taken with all three nouns, being feminine in agreement with the nearest."[17] This seems the most likely meaning. There is no special privileged category of spontaneous Spirit-inspired "songs," such that "psalms" and "hymns" lack this inspiration. The adjective "spiritual" is added to remind us that all these come from the Spirit.

Singing Scriptural Psalms and Songs Today

Paul teaches that the Spirit-filled church sings songs inspired by the Holy Spirit, in which, as we have seen, the Old Testament Psalms are prominent. It would be an overstatement to limit "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" to the Old Testament Psalms, but it would be a great mistake not to allow that the Old Testament Psalms ought to have, at the very least, a substantial place in the corporate worship of the church. The new covenant churches are thereby tied in to the long history of the household of God. And so, writes Hans-Joachim Kraus (1918–2000), "The Gentiles enter into the world of Abraham and David, where the Psalms had been sung and prayed."[18]

The first addition we might make to the Psalter in our singing is most naturally taken from other Spirit-inspired songs in Scripture, such as the Old Testament songs of Moses (Ex. 15; Deut. 32), of Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5), and of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10), and the New Testament songs of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), of Zechariah (Luke 1:67–79), of the angels (Luke 2:14), of Simeon (Luke 2:29–32), and of the people of Christ in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:9–10; 15:3–4).[19]

17 Best, *Ephesians*, 511. So also Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 546. The only significant scholar to disagree is Fee, though in his careful and nuanced discussion, he admits that we cannot be sure. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 653.

18 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Krim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 179.

19 Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 178. Kraus suggests that the reference to bringing a "psalm" in 1 Cor. 14:26 includes "the Jewish-Christian psalmody which is seen in Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:29–35" and also "the Christian psalmody which permeates the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:9–10; 11:17–18; 12:10–12; 19:6–8)."

Although most Christian traditions consider that the singing of appropriate nonscriptural songs and hymns ought to be allowed (especially if these arise out of the Psalms and songs within Scripture), this should never be at the expense of soaking our hearts in the Psalms. Writing in 1528, Martin Luther (1483–1546) lamented that "the world has been so filled with" legends, picture storybooks, and Bible histories "that the Psalter has been neglected."[20] I wonder today if he might lament that so many humanly crafted songs are sung that the Psalter has again been given short shrift.

So the first answer to the question "Why bother with the Psalms?" is that Scripture tells us to. This in itself would be sufficient reason. Andrew Shead and Andrew Cameron write that "to sing 'songs' in church, but not the Psalms, is like having preaching but not Bible reading," that is, to have our words *in place of* the very words God has given us.[21] "Much of contemporary evangelicalism," they continue, "has abandoned orthodox practice at this point, and the fact that we are blind to this is hard to account for, except in terms of a cultural capitulation to the cult of musical entertainment."[22]

If the New Testament assumes that churches will use the Psalms, the next question is to ask why.

What Blessings May Be Expected to Result from the Psalms?

Ephesians and Colossians suggest at least four areas of blessing associated with the Psalms, and the Scripture as a whole points to at least four others.

The Psalms Are Linked to the Filling of the Holy Spirit

In Ephesians 5:18–20, Paul gives a prohibition ("Do not get drunk with wine . . .") followed by an exhortation (". . . but be filled with the Spirit"). The emphasis falls on the exhortation, which is followed by five participles (set in bold in my translation below), the second and third of which share verbal roots with "song" and "psalm."

20 Martin Luther, "Preface to the Psalter," in *Luther's Works*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 35:253.

21 Even those who subscribe—as I do—to a very high view of preaching, such as in the Second Helvetic Confession ("The preaching of the word of God is the word of God"), will admit that Scripture itself is on a higher level! "Second Helvetic Confession," chap. 1, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed December 21, 2023, https://www.ccel.org.

22 Andrew G. Shead and Andrew J. Cameron, "Singing with the Messiah in a Foreign Land," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 160.

But be filled [present imperative, a continuous filling]
with/by the Spirit [ἐν πνεύματι, *en pneumati*),
speaking [λαλοῦντες, *lalountes*] to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing [ᾄδοντες, *adontes*, same root as ᾠδη, *ōdē*, "song"] and **making melody** [ψάλλοντες, *psallontes*, "psalming"] with your heart to the Lord,
giving thanks [εὐχαριστοῦντες, *eucharistountes*] always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father,
submitting [ὑποτασσόμενοι, *hypotassomenoi*] to one another in the fear of [in reverence for] Christ.
(The participle "submitting" is then followed, in Eph. 5:22–6:9, with a description of what particular submissions are meant—wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters—together with the obligations of husbands, parents, and masters.)

Before considering the participles, we must ask with what, or with whom, we are to be filled. The preposition ἐν, *en*, in the phrase ἐν πνεύματι, *en pneumati*, may mean "*by* the Spirit" (the Spirit is the agent who does the filling) or "*with* the Spirit" (the Spirit is the content of the filling). While either is possible, the former seems more likely. No other text in Paul speaks of the Spirit as the content of the filling. Fullness language in both Ephesians and Colossians is Trinitarian. In Ephesians 1:23 the church is called "the fullness of [Christ]." In Ephesians 3:19 Paul prays that "you may be filled with all the fullness of God." In Ephesians 4:13 he looks forward to the day when the church attains "to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." In the parallel passage in Colossians 3, the church is exhorted to be richly indwelt by "the word of Christ" (Col. 3:16). Elsewhere in Colossians, all the fullness of God dwells in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9), and the church has been "filled in [Christ]" (Col. 2:10). Putting all this together, we should probably see the exhortation to refer to a rich and full indwelling of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—given by the Spirit through the word of Christ.

So if the Spirit fills believers with the fullness of the triune God, the question then arises of how the five participles are related to this filling. Many, perhaps most, commentators suggest that these participles describe the

results of the filling by the Spirit. That is, first the Holy Spirit fills believers, and then, as a consequence, the church speaks, sings, and gives thanks, and believers submit in appropriate ways. Commentators sometimes just assume this to be the case.[23]

Where commentators offer reasons, they often contrast this understanding with what is sometimes called "a participle of means," that is, a participle that describes the means by which the main verb is achieved. In a detailed discussion, Daniel Wallace agrees that "the five participles are debatable" (i.e., what kind of participles they are). He also agrees that if these are participles expressing means, it "fits well with the grammar of the passage" (because such participles are often used in the present tense after a present-tense imperative, as here). But in spite of this grammatical likelihood, he goes on to reject this understanding for theological reasons, commenting that "it would be almost inconceivable to see this text suggesting that the way in which one is to be Spirit-filled is by a five-step, partially mechanical formula!"[24]

Andrew Lincoln, in a similar vein, writes,

> The connection between being filled with the Spirit and worship, which emerges through the subordinate participles of [Ephesians 5:]19, 20, should not be interpreted as meaning that participation in the church's liturgy is what produces the experience of the fullness of the Spirit. . . . The following participles are best interpreted as the consequences of the experience rather than its means.[25]

So the general consensus is that all the activities described by the five participles are the consequences or results of a prior filling of the Spirit. First the Spirit fills, and then his filling is evident in the presence of these activities, "addressing, . . . singing and making melody, . . . giving thanks, . . . submitting."

There are at least two reasons for questioning this view. One is that we are exhorted to "be filled," suggesting that somehow, in the economy of

23 E.g., "The following verses mention four resultant characteristics of being filled by the Spirit." Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 706. Similarly, Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 361.

24 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 639.

25 Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 345.

God, we play a part in this filling, as God sovereignly works in us to will and to work his good pleasure. But second, perhaps the most significant reason is the parallel passage in Colossians 3:16, in which it is precisely by the "teaching and admonishing" of "one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," that a rich indwelling of the word of Christ takes place and deepens in the life of the church.[26] In Colossians the mutual teaching and admonition that take place as we sing psalms to one another and to the Lord are what used to be called "means of grace," means by which God works his grace in our hearts. It would seem very natural to suppose that this is also what Ephesians 5 envisions. We should also note that if this is correct, then the giving of thanks from the heart (the fourth participle) and the appropriately lived-out godly submissions (the fifth participle) may also be means of grace, as God works in us "to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). In describing this as "a five-step, partially mechanical formula," Wallace caricatures a deeply biblical (and Pauline) understanding of sanctification and Spirit filling. Likewise, Lincoln's phrase "participation in the church's liturgy" both trivializes what is envisioned and even truncates it, removing the fifth participle ("submitting to one another," Eph. 5:21) from consideration.

Robert Smith has argued cogently that these five participles are best understood as "means participles." He writes,

> Paul is here identifying the means by which he expects his readers to carry out his exhortation to be filled with the Spirit. What I am suggesting, then, is that, like the commands to "walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16) or to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" [Col. 3:16], being filled by the Spirit is not a matter of "letting go and letting God," but (as Eph. 5:17 says) a matter of understanding the will of the Lord and then doing that will. So Paul does not leave his readers to guess how his command is to be carried out. He spells it out in detail: we are to address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, we are to sing and make melody to the Lord

26 Here "singing is clearly the means by which the word of Christ richly indwells the church. . . . For to be indwelt by the word of Christ (both personally and corporately) is not a different experience from being 'filled with the Spirit'; Christ's person is not separate from his word, nor is he separate from his Spirit." Robert S. Smith, "Music, Singing and the Emotions: Exploring the Connections," in *True Feelings: Perspectives on Emotions in Christian Life and Ministry*, ed. Michael P. Jensen (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2012), 269n34.

> with our hearts, we are to give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. These are the means (according to this passage at least) by which the Spirit fills the church with the fullness of God in Christ (Eph. 3:19; 4:13).[27]

I agree with Smith. It is precisely as we do what the participles describe that God chooses to fill us with the Spirit. I would also wish, in view of the word studies above, to emphasize the centrality of the Psalms in this ministry of music.

If this understanding is even partially correct, and I think it is, then the significance of singing, especially singing the Psalms, is considerably deepened. For we expect that the regular practice of thoughtful, heartfelt singing of psalms to one another is an instrument God uses to contribute to a rich fullness of the Holy Spirit in our lives and churches. It would be hard to think of a greater blessing.

The Psalms Are Linked to the Filling of the Holy Spirit in the Corporate Life of the Church

The singing of Psalms is a corporate activity of the church. Ephesians is the great letter for the church. It is emphatically and repeatedly corporate. The teaching of Ephesians 5:18–21 is given not to isolated individuals but to a church of Christ. The singing is addressed to "one another" and is connected (among other things) with appropriate submitting "to one another." Colossians 3, likewise, is an emphatically corporate chapter. It concerns relations between believers in fellowship. The psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are sung as a form of "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16). As we embark on our study of the Psalms, the church of Christ should be in the forefront of our hearts and minds.

The Psalms Are Intimately Linked to Our Life in Christ

In Colossians 3:16 "the word of Christ" (cf. Col. 1:25; 4:3; 1 Thess. 4:15; 2 Thess. 3:1) probably uses an objective genitive, that is, "the word that consists in [the message of] Christ." The goal of "teaching and admonishing

27 Smith, "Music, Singing and the Emotions," 267–69.

one another" in our life in Christ is achieved precisely by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Those who are exhorted to sing are men and women in Christ. They have died and "been raised with Christ," and their lives are "hidden with Christ in God" such that Christ is their "life" (Col. 3:1–4). To them "Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). The peace of Christ is to "rule" in their hearts (Col. 3:15). They do "everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). They are those on whom Christ shines (Eph. 5:14). They are to understand what the will of the Lord (i.e., the Lord Jesus) is (Eph. 5:17), to give thanks to God the Father "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," and to submit to one another "out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:20–21). The context, therefore, for our use of the Psalms is emphatically that of our lives in Christ, which are enriched by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

This life in Christ leads very naturally to a fourth blessing.

The Psalms Promote and Shape a Godly Life

In the wider context of both Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 are the concrete realities of the life of faith in Christ. "Look carefully then how you *walk*," writes Paul in Ephesians 5:15, echoing the theme of the Christian "walk" in Ephesians 4:1, 17; 5:2, and 8. We are to walk "not as unwise but as wise" (Eph. 5:15), with the practical daily wisdom of life, lip, and heart that the Psalms (among other scriptures) work in us. The Psalms help us more deeply "understand what the will of the Lord [Jesus] is" (Eph. 5:17), with an understanding that is affective and not merely cerebral. In both Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, the exhortation to psalm singing is closely followed by the very practical "household codes" spelling out the kinds of godly submissions that characterize and promote the life of a Spirit-filled church (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1).

This reminds us that the Psalms are "not the aimless expression of an emotion-filled faith" and that "in the Psalms we do not hear human voices raise to express noble thoughts" but rather the voice of "God himself who speaks in his Spirit to human hearts, to exhort and comfort, to instruct and assist."[28] The Psalms teach us, edify the church, and exhort us to godliness.

28 Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 179–80.

We therefore expect the Psalms to bear fruit in the lives of believers. The teenage Christian struggling in a difficult home is helped by regular exposure to the Psalms to learn to live in godly submission; the husband finding it hard to show Christlike sacrificial headship in marriage is helped by the Psalms to live out this calling; the badly treated junior employee struggling with resentment or bitterness is assisted by the Psalms in displaying Christlike virtues in the workplace. And so on.

Leaving behind the immediate contexts of Ephesians and Colossians, we may add four further blessings to be expected from the Psalms.

The Psalms Teach Us to Pray and Praise

We need to be taught to pray and praise.[29] Through Christ we have glorious access to the Father by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). But this is not the whole truth about prayer. We need to learn to ask according to God's will so that he will hear us (1 John 5:14). To pray in Jesus's name (John 14:14; 16:23, 26) means more than using the name of Jesus as a ticket to guarantee being heard; it means to pray both on the basis of Jesus's sin-bearing death and in line with how Jesus leads us in prayer.

John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray; Jesus's disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Jesus answered with the pattern we call the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). And the Lord's Prayer is the tip of a great Bible iceberg of how God teaches and trains us to pray, of which the Psalms form perhaps the most significant part.

It is a most wonderful blessing that in the Psalms God gives us words to speak in prayer and praise. In his excellent biblical theology of prayer, Gary Millar writes, "The *psalter* as a whole provides us with the most detailed and sustained treatment of how God's people can, should and must call on him."[30] This is perhaps the most wonderful characteristic of the Psalms: these words are better by far than any words we ourselves can formulate when speaking with God.

Mainstream Christian history has therefore valued the Psalms very highly. Brian Brock writes that "in the first few centuries of the Christian

29 This section should be read alongside the doctrinal study of prayer and praise in chap. 6.

30 J. Gary Millar, *Calling on the Name of the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Prayer*, NSBT 38 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 140.

era," the Psalms generated "far more commentaries than any other biblical book. More importantly, by at least the fourth century, the book of Psalms was being used as a *Psalter*, a songbook that was in constant—often daily—liturgical and private use."[31] Holladay comments, "By the fourth century the memorization of the Psalms by many Christians and their habitual use as songs in worship by all Christians about whom we know were matters of long-standing tradition."[32] Later, the monastic communities of the Middle Ages recited the Psalms as a regular part of their liturgy. In the Rule of Saint Benedict (ca. AD 530), all 150 psalms were to be recited each week.[33] When set Bible readings began to be adopted in services (in a lectionary), the singing of a psalm was not regarded as a reading so much as a response to the other scriptures read.[34]

On more than one occasion, Luther expressed the wonder of these God-given words most vividly. Once, when thinking of composing his own song, he realized that "the Holy Spirit, the greatest and best Poet, had already composed better and finer hymns, namely, the precious psalms, to thank and praise God. Therefore," he said, "I gave up my own wretched and worthless poetry and took up [the particular psalm he was discussing], the Holy Spirit's hymn and poem."[35] "Whoever has begun to pray the Psalter," he wrote at another time, "will soon give leave to [i.e., leave behind] those other, easy, little prayers of their own" because they lack the "power, passion, and fire" found in the Psalter.[36]

In his "Epistle to the Reader" prefixed to the 1542 Geneva Psalter, John Calvin (1509–1564) writes,

> Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we

31 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), xii.

32 Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 165.

33 Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 176.

34 Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 177.

35 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 13:351.

36 Quoted by Bonhoeffer in Geffrey B. Kelly, introduction to *Life Together; Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 147.

> shall find no better songs nor more appropriate for the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.[37]

The Psalms Encapsulate the Message of All the Scriptures

A number of writers have observed how the Psalms seem to encapsulate the whole message of the Bible in one wonderful book.

Early in the fourth century, Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373) penned a letter to Marcellinus, a friend who had been ill. "I learned," says Athanasius, "that you maintain a studious attitude toward all the holy Scripture, but that you read most frequently the Book of Psalms, and strive to comprehend the meaning contained in each psalm." Athanasius writes to commend and help him. He comments that "each sacred book" of Scripture "supplies and announces its own promise," that is, its distinctive contribution toward God's revelation. Using the image of distinctive plants, he writes, by contrast, that "the Book of Psalms is like a garden containing things of all these kinds."[38]

Also writing in the fourth century, Ambrose of Milan (339–397) notes, "Although all Scripture breathes the grace of God, yet sweet beyond all others is the Book of the Psalms. *History* instructs, the *Law* teaches, *Prophecy* announces, rebukes, chastens, *Morality* persuades; but in the Book of Psalms we have the fruit of these, and a kind of medicine for the salvation of men."[39]

Heinz Bluhm (1907–1993) writes of Luther that "on no other part of the Bible [than the Psalter] did he lavish so much time, energy, and sheer love."[40] In his "Preface to the Psalter," Luther says this:

37 Quoted in Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536–1543*, TAPS 69 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), 33. The reference to Augustine is from his first exposition of Ps. 34, in which he writes, "No one sings anything to [God] that is worthy, unless he [God] has first given it. What we sing today has come to us through the prophet at the prompting of Christ's Spirit." Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle and Boniface Ramsey, 6 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000), 2:45.

38 Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1980), 1–2.

39 Quoted by Herbert Lockyer, "In Wonder of the Psalms," *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1984, 76. I am grateful to John F. Evans for drawing my attention to this quotation.

40 Heinz Bluhm, *Martin Luther: Creative Translator* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1965), xi–xii.

> The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion [concise handbook] or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a small Bible . . . , so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here [in the Psalms] have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.[41]

Calvin famously claimed that there is nothing "which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation" that is lacking from the Psalms.[42] "What is there necessary for man to know," asks Richard Hooker (ca. 1554–1600), "which the Psalms are not able to teach?"[43]

It is perhaps partly for this reason that publishers sometimes print a pocket copy of the New Testament and Psalms. Somehow, when read in the light of the New Testament, the Psalms offer us in a (relatively) short space the entire message of Christ.

The Psalms Are a Corrective against an Idiosyncratic or Individualistic Piety

The Psalms express a healthy corporate solidarity with the people of Christ all over the world and in every age. This corporate dimension enables us to relate to God not as isolated individualists but as members of a great multigenerational, multiethnic, multicultural, multinational people whose history goes on for century after century. The Psalms are therefore a God-given safeguard against isolation in prayer and idiosyncratic ways of relating to God ("I like to relate to God like this"). They tie us to the long history of the people of God before and after Christ. Always in the Psalms our response is on the journey from "I" to "we."

41 Luther, "Preface to the Psalter," in *Luther's Works*, 35:254.

42 Calvin, preface to *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 1:xxxix.

43 Richard Hooker, quoted on the frontispiece of A. F. Kirkpatrick (1849–1940), *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes*, 3 vols., CBSC 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892).

Luther observes,

> The Psalter holds you to the communion of saints and away from the sects. For it teaches you in joy, fear, hope, and sorrow to think and speak as all the saints have thought and spoken. In a word, if you would see the holy Christian church painted in living color and shape, comprehended in one little picture, then take up the Psalter.[44]

The German pastor and scholar Claus Westermann (1909–2000) was imprisoned by the Nazis. He had with him in prison a copy of Luther's New Testament and Psalms. In a most moving preface to his book *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, he writes this of those in the Psalms who praise in times of isolation and grief:

> In such praise out of the depths, their need, the sorrow through which they had to struggle all alone, was no longer merely their own concern. It was not *merely* a test and confirmation of their piety, a happening that took place between God and their soul, but it was an occurrence in the congregation. Whenever one in his enforced separation praised God in song, or speech, or silence, he was conscious of himself not as an individual, but as a member of the congregation. When in hunger and cold, between interrogations, or as one sentenced to death, he was privileged to praise God, he knew that in all his ways he was borne up by the church's praise of God.[45]

The Psalms Shape All Human Life

As a final blessing I want to focus on a major reason for the enduring popularity of the Psalms in Christian devotion. This reason is the astonishing way that the Psalms both express and also reshape the feelings, affections, and desires of all human life. Many have marveled at how the Psalms express all the experiences of the human heart. A student once commented to me that the Psalms offer him a richer and broader palette of emotions with which to express and understand himself and others. In his *Letter to*

44 Luther, "Preface to the Psalter," in *Luther's Works*, 35:256–57.

45 Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim (London: Epworth, 1965), 9–10. Cf. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 2.

Marcellinus, Athanasius writes that "in the Book of Psalms, the one who hears . . . comprehends and is taught in it the emotions of the soul."[46]

Luther compares the human heart to "a ship on a wild sea, driven by the storm winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is stuck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. Here breathes a breeze of hope and of anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present blessings." He goes on to ask, "What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking [i.e., of the saints] amid these storm winds of every kind?" Precisely because the Psalms span the whole gamut of human experience, "the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better."[47]

Calvin calls the Psalms "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul" because "there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or, rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."[48]

Writing in 1903 in a culture saturated with the Psalms, Rowland Prothero (1851–1937) could say, "With a psalm we are baptized, and married, and buried." He went on to observe,

> With what strange power do the familiar words of the Book come home to us as we grow older! . . . Here . . . is a passage, which, with trembling voice and beating heart, we read aloud by the deathbed of one, with whose passing the light faded and our own lives grew grey, and void, and lampless. Yet it is still to the Psalms, even when they wound us most, that we turn for help and comfort. As life's evening closes round us, and as the winged thoughts, that we have made our own, sweep in from the horizon of our memories, no words come home to us with swifter, surer flight than those of the Psalms.[49]

46 Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 10.

47 Luther, "Preface to the Psalter," in *Luther's Works*, 35:255–56.

48 Calvin, preface to *Psalms*, 1:xxxvii.

49 Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (London: John Murray, 1903), 4.

The Psalms express all the vicissitudes, the sweeping emotions, the affections, and the longings of the human heart. But they do more than simply express these things; they reshape them.

The work of the gospel goes deeper than reforming our actions and words; it renews our heart. Our affections, desires, and aversions are disordered. We are attracted by what we ought not to desire, and we are untouched by what ought to delight us. We desire and delight in what we ought to shrink from and hate, and we care little for what we ought deeply to desire. For example, we long for the praise of others while struggling to rejoice when others succeed. We are inwardly sad when others rejoice at some promotion or some success in love, wishing their success had been ours—and we may even secretly be just a little pleased when they fail, in the ugly feeling we call *schadenfreude*. Far from rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, sometimes we weep inwardly at the joy of others and are gleeful at the weeping of our rivals. We love our pleasures and comfort while caring little for the honor of God and the glory of Jesus.

Only God can change the human heart. He does it by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the word of God with prayer. The Psalms play a significant part in this renewal, for they gradually reshape our affections and our aversions so that we love what we ought to love and hate what we ought to hate.

The Book of Common Prayer's "Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter" expresses it beautifully like this:

> O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.[50]

The Psalms are one of God's preeminent instruments to "order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men." We need God to work in us—often

50 Book of Common Prayer, "Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter."

through the Psalms—so that we "*love* the thing which thou commandest, and *desire* that which thou dost promise." David Dickson (1583–1663) writes that the Psalms "direct us how to apply saving doctrines to ourselves, and to make use thereof for reformation of our affections and actions."[51] They do not simply express our affections; they reform them.

There is a deep reason why they do so. It is a reason we can spend a lifetime exploring them. For the Psalms set before us the life of faith as it was lived flawlessly by Jesus. Athanasius says of Jesus that he "performed righteous acts, and not only made laws but offered himself as a model for those who wish to know the power of acting."[52] He goes on to write,

> It was indeed for this reason that he made this [life of faith] resound in the Psalms before his sojourn in our midst, so that just as he provided the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction needed for each emotion.[53]

By setting before us Jesus, the Psalms heal (i.e., provide "therapy"), correct, and reshape our "emotions and dispositions" so that we find ourselves cured and reordered. In a beautiful passage, Athanasius writes of a person being like a stringed instrument ready to "obey in all his members and emotions" through the "harmonious reading of the Psalms," which is "a figure and type" of this perfectly balanced life of the soul.[54] Indeed, "the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter."[55]

So the Psalms set before us and draw us into the perfect life of faith. Calvin writes eloquently about how the Psalms set before us the struggles of the life of faith. "Oftentimes," he writes, "there is exhibited to us in [the Psalter] one standing, as it were, amidst the invitations of God on the one

51 David Dickson, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), introductory page, before p. 1; italics added.

52 Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 13.

53 Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 13.

54 Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 28.

55 Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 30.

hand, and the impediments of the flesh on the other, girding and preparing himself for prayer."[56] If we substitute "every temptation common to humankind" for "the impediments of the flesh," this becomes what we have in the sinless Jesus, who is "exhibited to us" in his perfect humanity, "girding and preparing himself for prayer."

Dickson writes that the Psalms are given by God so that believers

> may resolve and prepare themselves for such a life as the saints have had in all generations before them; that is, a life mixed with crosses and sweet comforts; a life wherein they shall be put to make use of their faith in God by prayers, and shall not want for their answer in due time, matter of joy and praises to God; a life composed of variety of godly exercises, and alternating vicissitudes of conditions.[57]

When we are afflicted by a numbing coldness of heart, God gives the Psalms to warm our devotion. Dare we say it, surely even Jesus was tempted to coldness of heart and needed the Psalms to resist that testing. In 1537 Calvin drew up articles for the conduct of worship in Geneva. In them he writes,

> It is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be aroused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love. . . . The Psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardour in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of His name.[58]

The Psalms can take death-giving emotions and turn them into life-giving desires. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin writes that the Psalms not only portray emotions but show us how to express them. In particular, "they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross . . . so that the afflictions which are the bitterest and most severe to our nature,

56 Calvin, preface to *Psalms*, 1:xxxvii.

57 Dickson, *Psalms*, introductory page.

58 Calvin, quoted in Holladay, *Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 199.

become sweet to us, because they proceed from him."[59] Again, dare we say it boldly, the Psalms played a part in teaching and training Jesus, during his days on earth, to bear the cross.

In so doing, the Psalms do not manipulate our feelings, as a mood-inducing drug might do; they do not give us a "high." What they do is change our feelings by helping us grasp the facts. They take the word of God spoken "down" to us and enable us to respond in a way that is in line with these truths.

When the charismatic movement swept across British and North American Christianity in the 1960s, one of the sad consequences was the loss of proper emotion in some conservative churches. In reaction against errors in parts of the charismatic movement, in which emotion became disordered emotionalism, those who defined themselves as conservative or classical evangelicals sometimes retreated into a spiritual life with very little emotion.

This was a strange historical anomaly for those whose forefathers had been nicknamed "enthusiasts," and it meant that a young Christian in a conservative church might look across the street at the emotion of a charismatic church and wonder, by contrast, if his or her own church had room for emotion at all. The Psalms show us how to develop strong and godly affections—and indeed, fierce and healthy aversions as well. They train us to avoid both the unpredictable reefs of error and the deserts of a dusty orthodoxy. For the Psalms perfectly combine thought and feeling, theology and prayer, longings and realism, the subjective and the objective.

All these blessings come to the church of Christ when the Psalms are given their proper place. As Bonhoeffer wrote, "Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure is lost to the Christian church. With its recovery will come unexpected power."[60]

59 Calvin, preface to *Psalms*, 1:xxxix.

60 Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 162.

PART 1

CHRIST AND THE PSALMS

CHAPTERS 1, 2, AND 3 CONTAIN the kernel of the argument of this volume and of the thinking that undergirds the commentary. Chapter 1 begins with the Psalter and explores ways in which it cries out for completion; the movement is forward, from the Psalms to Christ. In chapters 2 and 3 we begin with the New Testament and seek to discern how Christ and his apostles understood the Psalms; the movement is—as it were—backward from Christ to the Psalms. Together these two directions form a kind of hermeneutical pincer movement, probing inward to the heart of the Psalter.

1

FROM THE PSALMS TO CHRIST

How the Psalter Cries Out for Future Completion

IN THIS CHAPTER we consider the Psalter as it comes to us in its canonical form and as it stands in the context of the Old Testament. For the most part, we do not yet focus explicitly on Christ and the New Testament. We are looking for features of the Psalter that express, or at least hint at, incompleteness. There may be other ways to interpret any one of these features, but I suggest that, taken together, they build up a picture that makes fulfillment in Christ at the very least plausible.

I am aiming not to impose an interpretation on the Psalms in spite of their original meaning but precisely to draw out from them what is their original meaning. In my view these facets of incompleteness cry out for a fulfillment only possible in the divine-human person of Jesus Christ, themes we consider in chapters 2 and 3.

In the argument of this chapter, I assume that the superscriptions give us reliable indications of authorship and, where they offer this, of historical context. For an outline of the thinking that lies behind this conviction, see appendix 1, "The Content, Status, Origin, and Significance of the Superscriptions."

The King: His Prevalence, Significance, and Positioning, and Our Expectation

By far the most significant pointer to incompleteness is the King in David's line. The King is prevalent, significant, and carefully positioned, and yet his promise is unfulfilled.

The Prevalence of the King

We cannot help but be struck by the prevalence of the King in David's line. Seventy-three of the one hundred and fifty psalms are headed "of David." In book 1, thirty-seven of forty-one have this heading; two of the others are closely connected to those that do (Pss. 10 with 9; 33 with 32); and the only others are the two introductory psalms, Psalms 1 and 2, the latter of which introduces the Psalter with massive fanfare about the King. Eighteen of the thirty-one psalms in book 2 are headed "of David," and most of the others are connected with a song-writing group set up by David in his preparations for temple worship (i.e., "the sons of Korah"). Only one psalm in book 3 and two in book 4 are "of David," for reasons to be explored. But then—perhaps surprisingly—no less than fifteen of the forty-four psalms in book 5 have this superscription. It is not hard to see why the umbrella heading "The Psalms of David" is often given to the whole Psalter.

We meet superscriptions that relate psalms to episodes in the life of David in Psalm 3 ("when he fled from Absalom his son"), Psalm 7 ("which he sang to the LORD concerning the words of Cush, a Benjaminite"), Psalm 18 ("on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul"), Psalm 34 ("when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away"), Psalm 51 ("when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba"), Psalm 52 ("when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, 'David has come to the house of Ahimelech'"), Psalm 54 ("when the Ziphites went and told Saul, 'Is not David hiding among us?'"), Psalm 56 ("when the Philistines seized him in Gath"), Psalm 57 ("when he fled from Saul, in the cave"), Psalm 59 ("when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him"), Psalm 60 ("when he strove with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt"), Psalm 63 ("when he was in the wilderness of Judah"), and Psalm 142 ("when he was in the cave").

We meet the name David in the body of six psalms: (1) as the climax of Psalm 18 ("to David and his offspring forever," 18:50), (2) as the culmination of Psalm 78 ("He chose David his servant," 78:70–72), (3) as the central focus of Psalm 89 ("I have sworn to David my servant," 89:3; see also 89:20, 35, 49), (4) in the context of blessing within Jerusalem in Psalm 122 ("the thrones of the house of David," 122:5), (5) at the heart of Psalm 132 (see

132:1, 10–11, 17), and (6) as the one who is rescued and given victory in Psalm 144 ("who rescues David his servant," 144:10).

In at least ten psalms, we meet "the king" (implicitly or explicitly in David's line), God's "anointed," or God's "son" (Pss. 2; 18; 20; 21; 28; 45; 61; 72; 84; 89).

It is hard to travel far in the Psalter without meeting the King. Again and again, he fills the field of psalmic vision.

The Significance of the King

Not only is the King prevalent, he is also extraordinarily significant. In Psalm 2 he will rule the world.[1] In Psalm 18 he becomes "the head of the nations" (18:43). In Psalms 20 and 21 he is crowned with length of days forever and ever, with great glory, blessing, and gladness. Again and again, he is portrayed as a great victor in battles (e.g., 27:2–3, 6). In Psalm 45 he is even addressed as "God" (45:6). Psalm 72 looks forward to his world-wide rule of blessing. In Psalm 122 his city is the place of justice and peace. Although Psalm 118 is not headed "of David," its content strongly suggests that it is a psalm of a great leader who makes an impact on the whole world—for "all nations surrounded" him, and yet he cut them off (118:10–13).

Even allowing for hyperbole, these descriptions of the greatness of the King cry out for fulfillment beyond anything known in the reigns of David, Solomon, or any of their successors in old covenant history.

The Positioning of the King (in the Structure of the Psalter)

The third feature of the King in the Psalter concerns what we may call his positioning, by which I mean where and how psalms that speak of him are placed in the Psalter. I deliberately refer almost interchangeably to "the Psalms" and "the Psalter." This is important, for it presupposes an intentional structure rather than a haphazard collection of more or less disconnected psalms. This opens up a huge topical area of scholarly study.[2] James Hely

1 James Hely Hutchinson has argued persuasively that the promises of Ps. 2 appear deliberately to exceed those explicitly made in 2 Sam. 7. James Hely Hutchinson, *Answering the Psalmist's Perplexity: New-Covenant Newness in the Book of Psalms*, NSBT 62 (London: Apollos, 2023), 28, 34–35.

2 See the discussion in the section "A Renewed Interest in the Superscriptions and the Canonical Form of the Psalter" in chap. 16, p. 265.

Hutchinson writes about "something of a revolution" in Psalms scholarship since the early 1990s, which involves not only noting the well-known features of the Psalter's shape at a "macro" level but "*making sense* of these phenomena—drawing inferences from them."[3]

The positioning of the King in the Psalter is carefully arranged to suggest to the reader that his kingship will be fulfilled in the future. The astonishing declaration of Psalm 2 opens the Psalter alongside Psalm 1. If we read the Psalter from the beginning—as we are presumably meant to do—our hearts are filled simultaneously with a godly man who loves God's word and a world-conquering King who is God's Son. Through all the distresses of the King (and they are many), this twofold vision of a law-loving, world-conquering King is never allowed to vanish from our sight. Books 1 and 2, closing with the words "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" (72:20), mingle intense struggles with remarkable confidence in future vindication and victory and then end with the magnificent vision of the King's reign in Psalm 72. By the end of book 2, we surely think, "Yes! There will be a Psalm 1 man who is the Psalm 2 King and will rule the world in righteousness."

The tone, however, changes sharply with Psalms 73 (singular) and 74 (corporate), which open book 3. Book 3 as a whole smells of exile and closes with the mixed confidence and agony of Psalm 89. Only one superscription is "of David" (Ps. 86), and it feels as if the Davidic king is almost eclipsed. But we must not forget Psalm 78, in which God's choice of David is the climax of the story (78:70–72). And still they pray, "Look on the face of your anointed" (84:9), even when there was no anointed king; whenever Psalm 84 was written, the Israelites continued to sing it during and after the exile, just as they continued to sing Psalm 2. To continue to say or sing these psalms only makes sense in the expectation of a future King. After the massive weight of material about the King in books 1 and 2, the paucity of references—until

3 James Hely Hutchinson, "The Psalter as a Book," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 23–24. He says the validity of this approach is "almost universally recognized by Old Testament scholars," mentioning as notable exceptions Tremper Longman III, "Messiah," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 471; and R. N. Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, JSOTSup 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). One carefully argued thesis of structure is presented by Hamilton, *Psalms*, 1:50–64.

Psalm 89—speaks with an eloquent silence. For we cannot but ask ourselves if Psalms 1–2 and 72, and all in between, are true.

David and the Davidic line are not prominent in book 4, with only two "of David" superscriptions (Pss. 101; 103). The book closes with a prayer for Israel to be gathered out of exile (106:47).

Book 5 is set in the context of return from exile and opens with joyful reference to those who have been gathered from the four points of the compass (107:2–3). Perhaps the most surprising facet of how the Psalter is arranged in its final form is the presence of two hugely significant "of David" collections in book 5, one (Pss. 108–110) near the opening and one (Pss. 138–145) just before the closing "Hallelujah Chorus" (Pss. 146–150). Whether or not we accept that these are genuine Davidic psalms (and I do), the fact that "of David" heads these two collections must surely be significant. Here in psalms for the postexilic church, in which there is no king in David's line, they are encouraged and exhorted to sing repeatedly of precisely this King.[4] Other psalms in book 5 attest to an ongoing belief that a Davidic king would come. For example, Jerusalem is celebrated in Psalm 122 partly because "the thrones of the house of David" are there (122:5). To sing this psalm after the exile, when there is no longer a house of David on any throne, is evidence of a forward-looking faith that one day there will be. Psalm 132 celebrates the "sure oath" made to David and prays that "for the sake of [his] servant David," the Lord will "not turn away the face of [his] anointed one" (132:10–11).

Our Expectation of a Future King

Because the King in David's line is so prevalent in the Psalms, because he is significant for the whole world, and especially because the psalms about the King are positioned in such a way that they encourage an intensely poignant expectancy, Bruce Waltke rightly makes this observation:

> When the Old Testament canon closed, no son of David was sitting on Yahweh's throne, and no living scion of David was associated with that hope. Accordingly, we may safely conclude that the royal psalms in the

4 The idea that "David" in book 5 becomes simply a symbol for any and every individual believer is unpersuasive, not least because it is hard to reconcile such a notion with Ps. 110, which emphatically reaffirms and intensifies the promises associated with Ps. 2.

> final shape of the Old Testament canon must have been interpreted prophetically precisely as . . . interpreted in the New Testament. This prophetic interpretation of these old texts is not a reinterpretation of them away from their original, authorial meaning; rather, it is a more precise interpretation of them in the light of the historical realities.[5]

Psalm 110 is a striking affirmation that Psalm 2 is still true and that the King in David's line will indeed rule the world. Psalm 145 focuses on the kingdom of God. But as an "of David" psalm and in the light of Psalms 2 and 110, that kingdom will be fulfilled by God's Messiah. One day we will see that the kingdom of God is indeed "the kingdom of our Lord *and of his Christ*" (Rev. 11:15). The Psalter sets before us the most extraordinary promises to the King in David's line. By the first century BC, singers of the Psalms would have known that these promises had not yet been fulfilled. They cried out for a future completion.

Four Other Facets of Incompleteness

While the King is—by far—the most important theme pointing to a future expectation from the Psalter, it is worth noting four other facets of incompleteness.

The Interplay of Voices

The Psalms feature a wonderful variety of voices. As the hymn writer Timothy Dudley-Smith says, hymns and songs can be celebratory (rejoicing in the saving acts of God), declaratory (rehearsing together some aspect of faith), didactic (opening new insights into truth), hortatory (stirring each other up), narratival (retelling part of the "old, old story"), meditative (helping us reflect), or petitionary (offering up prayers).[6] If this is true of hymns, it is because it was originally true of psalms.

In a very helpful chapter of his book *Singing the Songs of Jesus*, Michael LeFebvre calls the Psalms "praising conversations." He uses the analogy

5 Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 15.

6 Timothy Dudley-Smith, "Hymns and Songs in Christian Worship: Past, Present—and Future?" (address to the Pratt Green Trust, anniversary celebration, in Coventry Cathedral, March 28, 2009), https://www.stainer.co.uk/hymnquest/tds_coventry.pdf.

of Felix Mendelssohn's (1809–1847) *Elijah* oratorio, in which, at different times, the soloist Elijah sings to the people, the people (the chorus) sing to Elijah, and the people sing to themselves. He writes,

> The Psalms are not stories like the *Elijah* oratorio; but they are conversations. They are conversations in which the king is always at the center, mediating our praise. But sometimes, the king speaks to the people in the Psalms. Sometimes, the king leads the people in addressing God. Sometimes, the people sing to the king, or to God about the king, or to one another before the king. The Psalms are full of changing voices singing "praising conversations" with the covenanted king at the center.[7]

In all these voices, the fundamental truth to grasp is that rather than the Psalms being a matter concerning simply the individual and God, they are a corporate affair, in which the King leads the people in relating to God. The picture is corporate and King led.

Examples of voices include the following.

The Son of God (the King) speaks to God as his Father. In most "of David" Psalms and some other individual psalms, the King is the dominant voice. David the king—or some other leader or representative of the people of God—speaks to God as Father (e.g., Ps. 3:1–3).

The Son of God (the King) leads the people (explicitly or implicitly) in speaking to God the Father. In these cases, the psalm includes plural subjects, led by the King. Take Psalm 68, for example. Although this is headed "of David," it becomes clear that it is sung by all the people, who praise "the Lord, / who daily bears *us* up" (68:19), who speak of "*our* God" as a God of salvation (68:20). Indeed, the psalm features a grand procession of the people of God (68:24–27), led—it would seem—by David the king. So David leads the people in prayer and praise.

Some corporate psalms make no explicit mention of the King. An example would be Psalm 126. This is an anonymous Song of Ascents. It is corporate ("we . . . our . . . us"); the people of God sing it together, probably

7 LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus*, 65.

at a time in Israel's history when there was no longer a Davidic king. And yet even then there were leaders among the people, whether a governor like Nehemiah, a scribe like Ezra, a prophet like Zechariah, or a priest-prophet like Ezekiel. The people of God are always led by someone. Prayer and praises are often heard in and through a king or other leader.

God the Father speaks to his Son, the King. This voice is not frequent, but when we hear it, it is greatly significant. Important examples include Psalms 2:7–9 and 110:1 and 4.

God the Father speaks through his Son, the teacher, to his people, the nations, or both. In many of the psalms, we hear the "upward" voice of the King, the people, or the people led by the King to God in heaven. But in a number of psalms, we also hear a "downward" voice of authority speaking on God's behalf from heaven above. This is the voice of the teacher or prophet. It may be the King who teaches or some anonymous leader, but whenever a psalmist teaches, he does so by the Spirit of God and with the authority of God.

Examples include the following:

- Psalm 1 begins the Psalter with this voice; it is spoken by a leader or teacher to the people of God—or, indeed, to any who will listen.
- In Psalm 32 David speaks to the people, declaring a blessing on those who confess their sin and are forgiven, telling his own story of confession and forgiveness, and exhorting them to submit to his (ultimately God's) instruction.
- Psalm 37 is a sustained example of this voice. "Fret not," it begins, and then it continues with a long psalm of wise instruction.
- Sometimes this voice includes personal testimony, as, for example, in Psalm 73.
- Psalm 78 begins, "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching," and again continues with no "upward" voice of responsive prayer or praise.
- Often this voice appears as straightforward teaching, direct second-person appeal, as, for example, in Psalm 130:7: "O Israel, hope in the LORD!"

Other psalms include this "downward" voice mixed in with other voices. For example, in Psalm 4 David speaks "upward" in 4:1, "outward" to anyone who will listen in 4:2–5, and then "upward" again in prayer in 4:6–8.

The people of God speak about their King. Some psalms are spoken about the King, rather than by the King or to the King. In Psalm 20:1–5 the people pray *for* the King, as becomes clear in 20:9: "O LORD, save the king!" In 20:6–8 the people are given assurance that these prayers are heard. To pray for the King is to cry to God for a king who will be all that the King is meant to be. In Psalm 45 two sections (45:2–9 and 16–17) are addressed to the King, praising him for his beauty and affirming his great destiny. God leads the people of God in praise of the great bridegroom-king. Psalm 72 is another prayer that the King will be all that God has promised he will be.

The people of God speak to the nations. Sometimes in the Psalms the gathered people of God turn their voices outward and call to the nations. For example, Psalm 66 is a partly plural song sung by the people of God (e.g., 66:8). And it is partly singular (66:13–15, 17–20), featuring the voice of their (anonymous) leader. Much of it is addressed outward to the nations (66:1–9, 16). In these psalms we hear the public gospel appeal in which a leader leads the people in calling to the whole world to come and join in the praise.

The people of God speak to one another. In Psalm 121:1–2 an individual believer speaks; the remainder of the psalm (121:3–8) seems to be another voice, or perhaps other voices, replying to this believer with words of assurance. Perhaps this is one individual answered by the encouraging voices of the whole congregation, or perhaps one believer is answered by one other believer.

Singulars and plurals. In all these voices and others, it is striking to note the interplay of singulars and plurals. While it is sometimes possible that a singular voice is generic—that is, this could be any believer—it is often more natural to understand this singular voice as that of a leader in Israel and the plural voice as that of the congregation.

Examples include the following:

- Psalm 1 contains both singulars and plurals. Since there is a singular righteous person and a singular wicked person, it is perhaps most natural to take these as generic. Nevertheless, there may be hints of a fulfillment in one particular righteous man and possibly also of fulfillment in some preeminently wicked man (see on Ps. 1). The links with Psalm 2 may encourage us to pursue this interpretation.
- In Psalm 2 we meet both the singular King (the Son) and the plural "all who take refuge in him" (2:12).
- In Psalm 3 the King is hard pressed. But when he is given victory and salvation, the blessing of God falls on all God's people (3:8).
- Psalm 4 is a deeply personal psalm. But then we hear, "Who will show *us* some good?" (4:6), and we are reminded that behind David the singer stands a people.
- In Psalm 7 David prays that he will be vindicated and also that "the righteous" (plural) will be established (7:9). What happens to him affects what happens to them.
- In Psalm 9 David thanks the Lord that his cause is sustained (9:4) and also that all who know his name can trust him (9:9–10, 18).
- While David is front and center in Psalm 16, "the saints in the land" are there in the background (16:3).
- Both King and people are integral to Psalms 20 and 21.
- In Psalm 22 the King who suffers later tells of God's name "in the midst of the congregation" (22:22).
- Psalm 24 speaks of one who ascends the hill of the Lord but then speaks of "the generation" of those who seek God (24:6).
- Psalm 26 is individual, but then in 26:12 we see that he speaks "in the great assembly."
- In Psalm 28:8–9 the discussion moves from "his people" to "his anointed" and then back to "your people."
- Psalm 108 is a personal psalm of David, but then we read in 108:6 the clause "that your beloved ones may be delivered." Note also the plurals in 108:11–13 after the singular in 108:10.
- Psalm 116 is intensely personal, but then in 116:18 we see that it is spoken "in the presence of all his people."
- Psalm 118 has no superscription. There is no mention of David or "the king." And yet the singer says, "All nations surrounded me; / in

the name of the LORD I cut them off!" (118:10). These are not the words of just any individual believer but those of someone with cosmic significance. When we read later of "glad songs of salvation" heard "in the tents of the righteous [plural]" (118:15), it is hard not to think of the people (indeed, the army) led by the one who cuts off the hostile nations.

- Psalm 137 is first plural (137:1–4), then singular (137:5–6), and finally plural again (137:8).
- Psalm 145 is an interesting example, beginning with an individual voice (145:1–3) before moving to generations and a congregation (145:4–20) and closing with both an individual (145:21a) and "all flesh" (145:21b).

On its own, this interplay between singular and plural does not directly show incompleteness. But taken together with what we have noted about the theme of the King, this picture of a congregation led by a King who is still to come prompts us to look forward in expectation that the identity of at least some of the singular voices will be seen to be fulfilled in the voice of the future King.

Noteworthy Righteousness

In a number of psalms, righteousness is attributed to, credited to, or claimed by either an individual or a group ("the righteous," plural).[8] Some of these passages seem to speak of a very remarkable righteousness. Examples can be multiplied. The following is a sample, largely from Davidic psalms early in the Psalter.

Psalm 1 speaks of one whose "delight" is in God's law such that he meditates on it day and night. In a striking comment, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–1869) says, "Perfect delight in the law presupposes perfect union of the human with the divine will, . . . perfect holiness."[9] This is a true and remarkable observation, especially in the phrase "perfect union of the human with the divine will." It is hard not to think that this at least hints at a fulfillment beyond that of any man or woman in old covenant history.

8 For this section, see also chap. 8: "Righteousness: Who Are the Righteous in the Psalms?"

9 E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. P. Fairbairn and J. Thomson, 3 vols., CFTL 1–2, 12 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1845), 1:12.

In Psalm 2 the Father promises that when the King asks to rule the world, his prayer will be granted (2:8). Again, this interaction presupposes a remarkable relationship with God. Again and again, the King expresses confidence that his prayers are heard (e.g., 6:9). In Psalm 4 this hearing (4:3) is predicated on "my righteousness" (4:1); in Psalm 7, knowing that God is the "righteous God" and "righteous judge," David asks to be judged "according to [his] righteousness" (7:8–11). He is confident that he possesses a righteousness that will pass muster before the righteous God.

In Psalm 5 David speaks of the wicked as "they" and clearly does not include himself. How can this be? What kind of righteousness has he been given, and where does it come from?

Access to the presence of God in Psalms 15 and 24 depends on a remarkable blamelessness and integrity of life. Although some, by grace, approximated some of what is described, these portraits, even under the old covenant, cry out for a purer fulfillment.

One of the most striking claims of righteousness is made by David in Psalm 17 when he writes, "You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, / you have tested me, and you will find nothing," that is, nothing against me (17:3). While it may be suggested that David is simply claiming righteousness in some particular matter in which he has been falsely accused, the way this is expressed is exceptionally strong. That God should examine not simply his words and actions but all the movements, desires, hopes, and affections of his heart and find no trace of an evil thought or desire is astonishing. Can David really be innocent of the slightest trace of vengeful thoughts or self-centered desire?

In Psalm 18 David maintains, in a remarkable protestation of righteousness, that the reason the Lord has rescued him is because of his own personal righteousness, which is more than a righteousness that might simply be imputed to him, for it includes keeping the ways of the covenant Lord with moral cleanness of hands (18:20–24).

In Psalm 26 David says, "I have walked in my integrity," and calls on the covenant Lord to "prove," "try," and "test" his "heart and . . . mind" to confirm that this integrity is genuine (26:1–2).

There are other examples, but these suffice to illustrate the theme. The righteousness that is claimed is always covenantal and therefore received

by faith (Gen. 15:6). But it still leaves open the question implied in Romans 3:25: How can a just God impute righteousness to a sinner? How could he "[pass] over former sins"?

Intense Pressure and Suffering

The Psalms are soaked in suffering. Pain oozes from psalm after psalm. Some of this distress is extraordinarily intense.

In book 1 especially, the fact that all the world is against the King (Ps. 2:1–3) leads to crushing pressure. This is emphasized by the repeated "many" of Psalm 3, by the abundant tears of Psalm 6 (6:6–7), by the false accusations of Psalm 7 (7:3–4), by the "cords of death" that pull him down to Sheol in Psalm 18 (18:4–5), and perhaps supremely in the agonies of Psalm 22 (22:1–21).

We could adduce countless other examples, but perhaps suffering overflows supremely from Psalm 88. Here is a man "full of troubles," drawing near to the grave, "like one set loose among the dead, / like the slain that lie in the grave," who are not remembered by God but are cut off from his hand. He is shunned by those who were close to him because his condition is so horrifying. He suffers God's terrors and is utterly devoid of help (88:3, 5, 8, 15). Although suffering afflicts a broken world and we recognize these descriptions in some measure, there is something extreme about them that causes us to draw in our breath and wonder who this can be who cries out in such distress.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer addresses "the psalms that will not cross our lips as prayers" and observes that they make us "suspect that here someone else is praying . . . [and] that the one who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself, . . . [t]he *human* Jesus Christ to whom no affliction, no illness, no suffering is unknown."[10]

Praying for God's Judgment on the Wicked

The final facet I want to mention concerns what are often called "psalms of imprecation," either whole psalms or parts of psalms in which the psalmist prays in very strong terms for God to act in judgment on the wicked.[11]

10 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 54.

11 For this section, see the longer discussion in chap. 10: "'Imprecation': Can Jesus Christ Pray 'Imprecatory' Prayers?"

Whereas perhaps Psalms 69, 109, and 137 are the strongest of these, such pleas and desires appear in many places. In chapter 10 I argue that there are serious problems with trying to dismiss these as unworthy desires and ungodly prayers, for this involves us becoming the judges of which parts of the Psalms we consider acceptable.

But if we take these psalms as just as inspired as the more obviously "inspiring" parts of the Psalms—as I think we should—we are forced to ask the question "Who can have the temerity and the authority to pray these prayers?" For a sinner to pray them must necessarily be very dangerous, for it involves praying for one's own destruction. If a forgiven sinner prays them, we have to ask where that forgiveness came from? If we answer that it came from old covenant sacrifices, we have to ask whether the blood of animals can really atone for human sins. One way or another, these pleas suggest a fulfillment beyond the Psalter.

Conclusion

We have reviewed the grand theme of the King—his prevalence, his significance, his careful positioning in the Psalter, and unfulfilled old covenant expectation. We have also noted the rich pattern of singular and corporate voices, the claims of an unprecedented righteousness, the cries of a preeminent sufferer, and the boldness of prayer for God to judge the wicked. Together, these observations mark the Psalter as an unfinished compilation—unfinished not in the sense that more psalms are needed but rather in the sense that the Psalter cannot ultimately make sense until its expectations are fulfilled, hopes that reach their completion only in Christ.

Before moving to chapter 2, it is worth quoting Alexander Francis Kirkpatrick, who discusses "the Messianic Hope" in the Psalms. "Poetry," he writes, "was the handmaid of Prophecy in preparing the way for the coming of Christ."[12] Through the Psalms,

> expectation was aroused and kept alive. Hope became part of the national life. Even Psalms, which were not felt beforehand to speak of Him Who was to come, contributed to mould the temper of mind which was prepared to receive Him when He came in form and fashion far other than

12 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:lviii.

> that which popular hopes had anticipated; and they were recognised in the event as pointing forward to Him.[13]

He lists some of the themes that I expound in chapter 3 of this volume and writes,

> All these different lines of thought combined to prepare the way for Christ; but it must be remembered that the preparation was in great measure silent and unconscious. It is difficult for us who read the O.T. in the light of its fulfilment to realise how dim and vague and incomplete the Messianic Hope must have been until the Coming of Christ revealed the divine purpose, and enabled men to recognise how through long ages God had been preparing for its consummation.[14]

13 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:lviii.
14 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:lviii.