



## Sermon Transcript

### July 2, 2017

## Psalms: Prayers of Faith and Hope

### Prayer and Blessing

#### Psalm 1-2

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 2, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### Psalm 1

1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

### Psalm 2

1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying 3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.” 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

## Introduction to Psalms

This summer we are going to spend time in the book of Psalms. In preparing for this sermon series, I came across a statement about the book of Psalms that caught my attention. The statement went like this: “This current generation of Christians might be the least ‘Psalms-literate’ generation ever.”<sup>1</sup> The book of Psalms, as currently compiled, has been around for 2500 years. Thus the indictment leveled against this current generation of Christians is that compared to 2,500 years of “church” history, there is no generation less familiar with the Psalms than our generation.

The English title for this book, *The Psalms*, comes from the Greek word that means “song.” The Hebrew title for this book means “praises.” Literally, the psalms are songs of praise to God and they were to be used in the public worship of God. Some would say that the book of Psalms was the ancient hymnbook of the people of Israel. Whatever the case, they were meant to be read, sung and memorized.

The Psalms were front and center on the heart and mind of Jesus, who like many observant Jews of his day, most likely knew all 150 of them by heart. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we call “Palm Sunday” it was from the Psalms that the crowd burst forth with song, “*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*” When gathered in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover and to initiate what we celebrate this morning, the Lord’s Supper, they sang from the Psalms. When Paul exhorts us to be filled with the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 5, immediately after giving this command he says, “*addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.*”

As church history progressed, during the medieval times, the Psalms were the most familiar portion of Scripture for most Christians. They retained their elevated status during the Reformation as both Martin Luther and John Calvin encouraged that the Psalms remain a steady diet in the public worship of God’s people. To this day, theologians will argue that the Psalms should be “used and reused in every Christian’s daily private approach to God and in public worship.”<sup>2</sup> But for some reason, unlike the worshiping community of God’s people for the past 2500 years, this elevated role of the Psalms has been greatly diminished in our generation. Elizabeth Achtemeier said, “Though no OT book has been more important in the history of the church than the Book of Psalms, we are in danger of losing it, partly because of lack of use of the Psalms themselves.”<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright said it this way, “While we should compose new hymns and songs, to neglect the church’s original hymnbook is, to put it bluntly, crazy.”<sup>4</sup>

The reason N. T. Wright would suggest that it is “crazy” for us to neglect the Psalms is because of the unique nature of the Psalms. Of course, like the rest of Scripture, the Psalms are God’s revelation to us. The content of the Psalms, like all Scripture, is able to “*make us wise unto salvation*” especially as they point us to Jesus. But what makes the book of Psalms unique is that it is the only book of the Bible written to God. It is a book of prayers. It is a book that gives voice to all of the situations we face in life. It is a book that invites us into dialog and interaction and relationship with the living God.

I came across a great verse in my personal reading of the Bible this week that reminded me of the Psalms. The verse is 2 Chronicles 15:4 and it says, “*But when in their distress they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found by them.*” It is a verse that tells us that God wants us to turn to him and to seek him. And it is a verse that comes with the assurance that if we do so, we can find God. But how do we turn to God? What does it look like to seek God? The Psalms give voice to our turning to God and they actually put words in our mouths so that we can know what it looks like to turn to God and find him. The ancient church father, Athanasius said, “Whatever your particular need or trouble, from the Psalms, you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you . . . learn a way to remedy your ill.”<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller said that we can use the Psalms in such a way that we can put these prayers inside our prayers, or better yet, our prayers inside the prayers of the Psalms and approach God in that way.<sup>6</sup>

Through this series, I want to elevate the role of the Psalms in my own personal life. From a church perspective, I want to take steps to be more systematic and intentional in using the Psalms in our corporate worship. And I pray that through this series, you too will gain greater insight in how to voice your faith and trust in God through the Psalms. These Psalms are a gift to us from God, an invitation to cast all of our cares upon God, knowing that he truly does care for us.

## **Understanding the Book of Psalms**

I think there are several reasons why the Psalms have been somewhat diminished in our personal and public worship of God. I know from a personal standpoint, when it comes to literature, I am not much of a poet. I am more drawn towards narrative that tells a story or didactic material that teaches a principle or makes an argument. But the Psalms are poetic and it is important when you read them to appreciate the artistic element of the Psalms. In fact, Elizabeth Achtemeier said that the other reason why the Psalms have been diminished in our minds, is because we often “lack the skills required for understanding them.”<sup>7</sup> They are creative and they paint a picture with words.

But the other thing that is often missing in our understanding of the Psalms is how the whole book fits together. You might be tempted to think that the Book of Psalms is just a collection of individual Psalms that were gathered over time. We know that over 70 of the Psalms were written by David. At least one was written by Moses, about 500 years before David, and some were written 500 years after David as Israel was in exile. And so it may appear to you that as “psalms” are being written over a period of about 1000 years, they are just haphazardly added to this ancient collection of poems. As if to say, “Here is another good one. Add it to the collection!” But that is not the case at all. Like all of the other books of the Bible, this book is carefully put together and through the way it is arranged, it communicates something to us. By understanding the “big picture” found in the Book of Psalms, you can get a better understanding of the individual Psalms when you read them.

To help us put the book of Psalms together, I want to give you a number to keep in mind. It is the number “five.” The book of Psalms ends with five psalms of praise. Psalms 146-150 each begin and end with the Hebrew word, *hallelujah*, which simply means “*Praise the LORD.*” In fact, the very last verse in the entire book, Psalm 150:6 reads like this, “*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!*” These five psalms of praise, serve as a conclusion to the Book of Psalms.

But that is not the only place the number “five” plays a prominent role in the book of Psalms. This collection of 150 Psalms is divided into “five” books. In fact, if your Bible is opened to Psalm 1 this morning, you will see at the top of the page the heading, BOOK ONE. Psalms 1-41 make up BOOK ONE. BOOK TWO is Psalms 42-72. BOOK THREE is Psalms 73-89. BOOK FOUR is Psalms 90-106. And then, BOOK FIVE is Psalms 107 to 150. And each of these five books ends with some version of this phrase, “*May the LORD God of Israel be blessed forever. Amen and Amen.*” At the very least, this pattern indicates some intentionality in the way this book is arranged.

So the Book of Psalms ends with “five” Psalms of praise. The entire book is divided into “five” books. Why the number “five?” What is significant about the number “five” to the people of Israel and what does it tell us about the Book of Psalms?” If you know the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, you know that it begins with the “five” books of Moses, the *Torah*. The Bible begins with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, as Israel is getting ready to enter the promised land, Moses makes his final appeal to them, to obey God’s commandments. The promise was that if they kept the commandments God gave them when they entered covenant with God at Mount Sinai, they would be blessed in the land God was giving them. He said to

them in Deuteronomy 28:2, “*And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.*” There is blessing in living under the good rule of God.

But knowing the rest of the story, we know that Israel did not keep the commandments of God. Time and time again, they broke covenant with God. And so, in time, as God promised, he sent them into exile. For seventy years they languished in captivity in Babylon. What is interesting to note is that the book of Psalms was arranged into its present format—150 chapters divided into five books—after Israel returned from exile. By putting these prayers into “five books” the editors wanted to call attention to the *Torah*. On one hand, you could say that the book of Psalms became the “New Torah.” By that, we are not saying that God’s law changed. Rather, it was a way to encourage Israel to learn from their past mistakes. Perhaps a better way to put it is that through these prayers, these Psalms, Israel was introduced to the lifelong practice of prayer and the role of prayer in helping them keep the commandments of God.

That alone is instructive for us, isn’t it? It is through prayer that we seek God and turn to God. It is through prayer that we rely on God. So these Psalms, are designed to help us express our dependence on God as we seek to live faithfully. It is like in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “*thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” we are praying that God’s will would be obeyed on earth as it is obeyed in heaven. But by virtue of praying this request, we are also confessing our prayerful dependence upon God to follow him in obedience. That is what is great about the book of Psalms. This is not a book about prayer. Rather, it is a book of prayers. It is these prayers that help us walk through any situation of life and to do so faithfully.

N. T. Wright is correct to say that it would be “crazy” for us to neglect this book of prayers. As disciples, followers of Christ, it is our desire to live in obedience to God. There is blessing in following God. When I was at the EFCA National Conference last week in Austin, TX, I went to a seminar on discipleship. A disciple of Christ is a follower of Jesus. The facilitator of the seminar said that the key discipleship question we all need to ask ourselves is, “what is my next step of obedience?” It doesn’t matter where you are in “the long line of disciples.” You may have just gotten in line and you are in the back of the line just getting started as a follower of Jesus, or maybe you have walked with Jesus all your life and you are close to the front of the line. Regardless of where you stand in the line, the question remains, “what is my next step of obedience?” But you won’t be able to take your next step in obedience, whatever that step happens to be, if you don’t take it on your knees. The Psalms invite you to get on your knees. And

once you are on your knees, the Psalms inform and shape your prayers and ultimately they shape and form your heart.

## Two Primary Prayers

As we have seen, the Book of Psalms has a main body made up of five books. It has a conclusion, made up of five Psalms. If that is the case, one would expect to find an introduction to these 150 Psalms. And there is an introduction, Psalms 1-2. Do you notice how Psalm 1 begins and how Psalm 2 ends? The word “*Blessed*” forms a bracket around the introduction which shows that they go together. Blessed is the one who delights in *Torah*, the Law of the Lord. Blessed is the one who takes refuge in God’s promised Messiah. It is these two themes that are carried all the way through the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms is filled with prayers of faith and prayers of hope.

### Psalm 1: *Prayers of Faith*

Psalm 1 basically says that when it comes down to it, there are only two ways to live. Either we are going to receive our cues for living life from God or we will receive our cues from someone else. The option for all of us is posed in the opening verses. “*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*” I think most people would say that when it comes down to it, they want to be aligned with God. But this psalm makes it clear that to be aligned with God means that you embrace the law of God. That is, you embrace the instruction of God. You can’t have God apart from what God says. And the stakes are high. With God, there is life. Without God, there is death.

This pattern of “two ways to live” is picked up throughout the Scriptures. Proverbs is constantly pitting the way of wisdom against the way of folly. And what is the beginning of wisdom according to Proverbs? It is the fear of the Lord. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is presenting himself as the new Moses, the giver of the Law. Like the book of Psalms, he is restating the essence of *Torah*. Often, in the Sermon on the Mount he says, “*You have heard it said*” referring to the Old Testament Law, and then he says, “*But I say to you!*” “*You have heard it said that you shall not murder. But I say to you that if you are angry with your brother you are guilty of murder.*” In the Sermon on the Mount he is restating the very heart of the Law of God, to love God and to love others. And do you know how the Sermon on the Mount ends? It ends with the “two ways to live.” You can shoot for the wide gate or you can enter through the narrow gate. You can be a tree that bears good fruit or a tree that bears bad fruit. You can build your house on the rock

or you can build your house on the sand. But there is one thing you cannot do. You cannot be in the middle. There is no fence to straddle. You are either following God or you are not.

And so throughout the Psalms we find Psalms that celebrate the Law of God. Right in the middle of BOOK ONE we find the well loved Psalm, Psalm 19. Here we read, *“The Law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”* Of course, there is Psalm 119, the longest chapter in all the Bible. Using the Hebrew alphabet, this psalm celebrates the Law of God. All 176 verses reinforce what is said in Psalm 1 when we are encouraged to meditate on the Law of the LORD day and night. Here we read, *“How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.”* Or, *“Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.”* Of course, this brings us right to Jesus because we all know how we fail to keep God’s law. What we could not do, Jesus did for us through his obedience to God and through his death on the cross to atone for our sin. And so now our desire to obey God does not come out of duty, but out of love for God because of his grace to us in Jesus.

I love what Psalm 1 says about the one who delights in God and his Word. It says, *“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”* It implies that heat will come. But when the heat of life comes, this person will not wither. God will sustain him or her. The *ESV Psalter* puts it this way, *“Will the trials still to come in our lives prove us to be deep-rooted trees, incapable of being blown over, or will they show us to be chaff, blown away by the slightest breeze?”*<sup>8</sup> It says in verse 4, *“The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.”* And so this book of prayer, the Psalms, is filled with prayers for God’s people as they strive to live faithfully before God.

### Psalm 2: Prayers of Hope

Psalm 2 forms the second half of the introduction to this book of prayers. It immediately puts this journey of faith into the context of reality. It is a struggle. There are forces in this world working against God. Psalm 2 begins, *“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”* It is a reminder to us that we live in a world that has rejected God as the good ruler of this world. Consequently, life is filled with suffering and because we live in this broken world, we suffer too.

One thing that is clear through the book of Psalms is that God's people are not immune to suffering or to injustice. One of the beautiful things about the book of Psalms is that it gives voice to our suffering. One of the common kinds of psalms you find in this book is psalms of lament. They are prayers that don't ignore our suffering and pain we all experience in this life. Rather, they give voice to our suffering and pain. And so in this book of prayer we hear prayers like Psalm 5, "*Give ear to my words, O LORD; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sounds of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.*" Or there is the prayer of Psalm 7, "*O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me, lest like a lion they tear my soul apart, rending it in pieces, with none to deliver.*" Or there is Psalm 10 where the prayer begins, "*Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*" And then, of course, there is that cry we all can relate to in Psalm 13, "*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*"

Through these prayers of lament, we are giving attention to the evil and suffering that exists in this world and we are calling on God to do something about it. If nothing else, these prayers tell us that lament is an appropriate response to the evil and suffering in this world. It bothers us. It is hard not to find a person who doesn't believe that this world is a mess. Everywhere you go, there is pain and suffering. Every institution displays some form of corruption. We know, deep down, that this is not the way it should be. But it is the way it is no matter where you live, which suggests that the answer to fixing this world does not rest in man, but in God.

In Psalm 2, in this introductory psalm, we get a glimpse of the hope that there is in God. In verses 6-7 we hear God say, "*As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.*" *I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."* This immediately reminds us of 2 Samuel 7, where God promises David that he would have a descendant who would rule over God's kingdom forever and that it would be a kingdom of justice and peace. In other words, through this anointed Messiah, good would indeed defeat evil in this world. And so Psalm 2 concludes that all who take refuge in this Messianic King, will be blessed. And who is this promised son of God who will bring God's kingdom to earth? It is Jesus. Therefore, these prayers in the book of Psalms teach us to hope in the promises of God that come to us through Jesus.

As you make your way through the book of Psalms, this hope in God to bring his kingdom to earth is rehearsed in each of the five books of Psalms. For example, in Psalm 72 at the end of BOOK TWO, there is a prayer for the future reign of God's promised Messiah. The prophets Isaiah and Zechariah are quoted in this psalm as they speak of

the coming kingdom of God to earth. And then the psalm ends by rehearsing the promise made to Abraham about God's intention to bring his blessing to this broken world through the descendant of Abraham, Jesus. And so it ends with this great picture of the coming kingdom of God in verse 17, *"May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed! Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed by his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory."*

Psalm 2 sets the tone for the rest of the book of Psalms because it tells us that God's kingdom of peace and justice will someday come to earth. And so these prayers of lament help us long for that day and they give voice to our suffering. Let me give you one more observation about these prayers of lament. As you make your way through these "Five Books of Psalms" what you discover is that the first three books are filled with laments. That is where you will find most of the laments in the book of Psalms. But as you get to BOOK FOUR and BOOK FIVE, the tone changes dramatically. It changes from lament to praise. In other words, as you walk through the pain and suffering of this life and put your trust in the promises of God through Jesus, God turns your mourning into joy. God will redeem this broken world as he redeems our broken lives through faith in his Son, Jesus. This is why the book of Psalms ends with five psalms that each begin and end with that cry, *"Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!"*

As we get ready to look at the Psalms this summer, know from the very beginning that these are prayers that help us know how to turn to God and seek him. They are prayers of faith as we seek to follow God as followers of Jesus. They are prayers of hope that help us rest in the promise of God even while we suffer in this world. They remind us that someday God will fully bring his kingdom to earth. *"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* In the meantime, we live by faith and the Psalms are given to us to help us do that.

## **Conclusion**

As we make our way through this sermon series this summer, we are going to take a look at a sample of psalms from each of the five books of Psalms. In doing so, my hope is that it will help us learn how to pray prayers of faith and hope as we follow after Jesus.

My encouragement to you is to take a step this summer to saturate yourself in the book of Psalms. There are several ways you can do that.

If you read five Psalms a day, you can get through the book of Psalms in a month. Consider doing that for July and August. Or, read a psalm a day. Or get a book like *The ESV Psalter* or Tim Keller's devotional called *The Songs of Jesus* and start letting the psalms form your prayers and shape your heart.

We would be “crazy” to neglect this book!

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<sup>1</sup>Chris Bruno “4 Reasons to Soak Yourself in the Psalms” [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org), January 27, 2017

<sup>2</sup>Tim Keller *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms* (New York: Viking Press, 2015) 1

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Achtemeier “Preaching from the Psalms” *Review and Expositor* 81 (1984) 437-439

<sup>4</sup>N. T. Wright *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York: Harper Collins 2013)

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Keller, pg. 1

<sup>6</sup>Keller, 1

<sup>7</sup>Achtemeier, 437

<sup>8</sup>*The ESV Psalter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016) Psalm 1

