

# ***The Pilgrim Psalms: The Journey Isn't Over***

Lesson 1

## ***Introduction to the Pilgrim Psalms***

Introduction

### **Outline:**

- I. What is the distinctive place of the Psalms in the Old Testament?
- II. When did the psalms originate?
- III. When were the psalms compiled?
- IV. What are the “pilgrim psalms”?

**Introduction:** This series should consist of 17 lessons over 17 weeks—one lesson of introduction and sixteen lessons on individual psalms (two lessons on Psalm 130). The introductory lesson is designed to place the pilgrim psalms within their context within the whole psalter and will try to provide answers to the following questions:

- I. What is the distinctive place of the Psalms in the Old Testament?

The Hebrew title for the book is “Praise Songs.” The title given to the book in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, is from the Greek word *psalmoi* (lit., “to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument”). Its Old Testament equivalent is the word *mizmor* that occurs 57 times in the Psalm titles and is always translated *psalm*. Essentially the word has come to mean simply “a song of praise.”

However, though the psalter is a book of praise, it is also much more. It comprises the largest and most comprehensive insight into a variety of inspired heart responses from a diverse cross-section of God's people to God's ways and words. In many cases the psalmists are expressing themselves to other people, and often directly to God. However, even when expressing themselves to others, the prevailing tone is one that is aware of God's close presence and listening ear. Our privilege is to "eavesdrop" in on the writers' private wrestlings and their efforts to discipline their minds to think God's thoughts after Him. We can vicariously enjoy their conclusion to again and again be satisfied with God. Alternately, the psalmists are remembering the history of God's dealing with His people, meditating on the ethical implications of faith in God, and/or becoming God's mouthpiece for prophetic revelation or declarations of His character. Each of these elements is mixed with a heart of devotion.

What a testimony is borne throughout the Psalm, by the union of personal experience with dogma, that a true theology is bound up with experience and elaborated in living (Marvin Vincent, Preface to Samuel Cox, *Pilgrim Psalms*, xi).

As a result of the responsive and personal nature of the psalms, the predominant style is more poetic. Some are prayers, some are intended as instructional (*maschil*), and some seem to be written for special singing. Psalms then properly fall into the section of Old Testament books labeled as the Books of Poetry (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon), or the Wisdom literature.

Though it is a book of poetry, its impact or importance should not be diminished in the least. Knowing what kind of literature it is simply helps us to know how to read it.

To interpret literally the language of imagination, wherever found in Scripture, is to make it appear grotesque or ridiculous, but to make due allowance for poetic license is to reach the truth by one of the greatest faculties God has entrusted to us. Things and truths are none the less real and true when they are spoken of in the language of imagination, but we must be careful to distinguish between truth poetically and truth dogmatically expressed (William Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, 24; Scroggie [1877-1958] was a student at Spurgeon's Pastors' College and eventually returned as a Bible teacher there. He pastored churches in England and Scotland and was an outspoken voice for the authority of the Bible in the face of the growing liberalism of his day).

## II. When did the psalms originate?

Old Testament singing of praise to God originated long before the psalter was compiled. Early Old Testament songs include:

- Moses and Miriam's song of deliverance (Exodus 15:1-21)
- Moses' Song reviewing the merciful salvation of the LORD (Deuteronomy 32:1-47)
- Deborah's song following the defeat of Sisera and his 900 chariots (Judges 5:1-31)
- A Song of David (2 Samuel 2:1)

Our hymns typically are written and then a tune is constructed to fit the words. Often with psalms, the words were composed to fit the tune.

The psalter is a compilation of psalms, composed probably over a period of nearly 900 years ranging from the days of Moses (ca. A.D. 1440) to the early post-exilic period (516–445 B.C.). As a result the psalter includes selected musical pieces covering a span of nearly 1,000 years.

The author of a psalm is identified in the title in approximately two-thirds of the psalms: (See transparency: Psalm Authors By Name)

<b>Author</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Psalms</b>	<b>Date</b>
David	73	47%		1020-975 B.C.
Asaph	12	8%	50, 73-83	1020-975 B.C.
Sons of Korah*	11	7%	42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88	1020-975 B.C.
Solomon	2		72, 127	950 B.C.
Heman, the Ezrahite	1		88	1020 B.C.
Ethan, the Ezrahite	1		89	1020 B.C.
Moses	1		90	1440 B.C.
“Orphan” psalms**	49	32-33%		Varied, some during exile (137) and return (126)

\*Korah was a descendant of Levi through the brother of Amram (the father of Moses and Aaron). Korah, along with Dathan and Abiram led a rebellion of 250 “men of renown” against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. They protested against Moses and Aaron’s authority among the people and seem to be insisting on a return to the days when priestly authority was less centralized (Numbers 16). Ultimately God showed He was on the side of Moses and Aaron and sent fire out of the earth to consume them and opened the earth to swallow them. Many of the family of Korah did not participate in the rebellion and continued to play an important role among the Levites. They seem to have been given a visible role in the tabernacle/temple singing ministry (1 Chronicles 6:31-32).

**\*\*Though the authors of the remaining 50 are not identified, in some cases, we believe the author’s identity is traceable through historical references or personal allusions noted in the psalms or by New Testament identification (i.e., Acts 4:25 says David wrote Psalm 2).**

### III. When were the psalms compiled?

There are at least three major divisions within the psalter, but most Bible students see a total of five. The divisions seem to indicate that portions of the psalter had been collected for use in temple worship over a period of time. The five major “books” that make up the psalm book are as follows (see transparency: Books of Psalms within the Psalms):

Book 1 – Psalms 1-41; doxology in 41:13  
 Book 2—Psalms 42-72; doxology in 72:18-20  
 Book 3—Psalms 73-89; doxology in 89:52  
 Book 4—Psalms 90-106; doxology in 106:48  
 Book 5—Psalms 107-150; doxology in 146-150

(Use transparency: Psalm Authors By Book for this section)

<b>NAMES</b>	<b>BK. 1</b>	<b>BK. 2</b>	<b>BK. 3</b>	<b>BK. 4</b>	<b>BK. 5</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
David	37	18	1	2	15	73
Asaph		1	11			12
Korah		7	4			11
Moses				1		1
Solomon		1			1	2
Ethan			1			1
Heman			1			1
Anon.	4	4		14	27	19
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>150</b>

The entirety of the first book (1-41) is usually assigned to David’s authorship, even though at least four of the psalms have no title ascribing the psalms to him (1,2,10,33).

The second book (42-72) consists of 18 more psalms attributed specifically to David, but seven of the psalms here are attributed to the sons of Korah (see above). Four are anonymous, and one each is attributed to Asaph (50) and Solomon (72). Bible students believe this book may have been compiled during the reign of either Josiah (637-608 B.C.) or Hezekiah (ca. 710 B.C.).

The third book (73-89) consists of only seventeen psalms:

eleven psalms by Asaph (the most prolific contributor after David), three to the sons of Korah generally, two to the Ezrahite men, and one to David. There are no anonymous psalms in the third book. Like the second book, Bible students believe this one may also have been compiled during the reign either of Josiah or Hezekiah.

The bulk of the first three books seems to have been written during the lives of David and Solomon. The latter two books, in contrast, stretch from the time of Moses (90) to the post-exile period of Israel's history (500-450 B.C.).

Books four (90-106) and five (107-150) are distinctive for the large number of anonymous psalms. Fourteen of the seventeen in the fourth book are anonymous, and twenty-eight of the forty-four in the fifth book are anonymous. These two books appear to have been compiled during the days of Ezra as temple worship was being renewed. Scroggie's conclusions essentially affirm this:

The work of gathering these prayers and praises of Israelitish saints may well have begun in the time of Solomon, and that it was completed not later than the second century before Christ, in all likelihood, much earlier, seeing that the first four Books were in existence when 1 Chron. was written (cf. 1 Chron. 16:36 with Ps. 106:48), so that the process of compilation may have occupied seven hundred years from the ninetieth to the second century B.C. Probably Book 1 belongs to the early period of the Jewish Monarchy, Books 2 and 3 to the middle period, and Books 4 and 5 to the Post-exilic period. In all likelihood the first Book was compiled by Solomon, the second and third Books after many years by 'the men of Hezekiah' (Prov. 25:1; 2 Chron. 29:30), and the fourth and fifth Books later still in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah" (Scroggie, 14-15).

IV. What are the “pilgrim psalms”?

Psalms were not intended for public worship only, though they would have generally been introduced in public worship. Memorized songs made truth portable and memorable. To emphasize the need to remember the content of the psalms, the Jews even assigned specific psalms to the days of the week.

Saturday.....	92
Sunday.....	24
Monday.....	48
Tuesday.....	82
Wednesday.....	94
Thursday.....	81
Friday.....	93

A section of the fifth and final book of the psalter includes 15 psalms (120-134) that are often called the pilgrim psalms, or the songs of ascent. These psalms deal with the issues of life. Though they may well have been part of the festal celebrations, they were probably most often sung in connection with the annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the festivals. Each of the pilgrim psalms is titled as “A Song of Degrees” or “A Song of Ascent.” Students of the Bible have been trying for centuries to discern precisely what that title means. Though a couple of theories persist, probably the best explanation of their use is in connection with the pilgrimages, a time when the Jews ascended to their sacred Holy City set on five hills.

The men of Israel over 30 years of age were commanded to attend three of the seven Jewish festivals instituted prior to the exile. These feasts were special times of national convocation, dedication, and devotion. All year long, families were to set aside



funds as part of their tithe in order to pay for the expenses of these journeys to Jerusalem in addition to the commemoration that would take place for those remaining behind at home (Deuteronomy 14:23-26). During the time of the feasts, every day was as the Sabbath and all work was to be suspended (Leviticus 16:29; 23:7-8, 21, 24-28, 35-36).

The pilgrimage feasts were joyous times for the people of Israel. They held both a religious significance and an economic one as each was associated with the blessings of a harvest time. (See transparency: Pilgrimage Feasts)

After David returned the Ark to Jerusalem and essentially established his dynasty (1000 B.C.), the city became the center of worship and probably was the place from where most of the Psalms were written. In the case of the pilgrim psalms, Jerusalem is a major theme. Jerusalem, Zion, the Temple, and thrones are repeatedly mentioned.

In a unique way these psalms seem to capture and mix four elements that would have been prominently on the minds of nearly every Jew journeying to the feasts:

Feasts	Historic Religious Significance	Economic Significance	Time of Year
Passover/Unleavened Bread Festival 8 days	Remembering the Exodus (Ex. 12:6; Lev. 23:4-14; Num. 28:16-25; Dt. 16:1-8) and meal of unleavened bread with the hasty departure	Barley harvest – the firstfruits of barley were waved before the LORD in the temple as a token of the harvest	March/April
Weeks (Pentecost)	Commemorating the giving of the Law and the establishing of God's covenant with Israel (Ex. 34:26; Lev. 23:15-21; Num. 28:26-31)	End of early wheat /grain harvest	Seven weeks later
Booths (Tabernacles) 8 days	Remembering the wilderness wanderings and dwelling in temporary booths along with God's miraculous provision for them (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:33-36, 39, 43; Num. 29:12-28; Dt. 16:13-15)	Harvest festival – the work of the year was complete	September / October

- 1) Rejoicing in God's past dealings with them as a nation, either by way of entering into covenant, miraculously delivering them, or miraculously sustaining them
- 2) Gratitude to God for His present material provision for them in the most recent harvest or in the complete year of harvests
- 3) Exulting in Israel's anticipated glorious future
- 4) Confirming to them that the God of their spiritual past and of their glorious future, who was presently providing materially for them, would also be their present Spiritual Rock. In their travels they were not immune to struggles brought on by the threats of enemies to their home, hardships on the journey, or even the threat of disunity with other pilgrims. These psalms stabilize them in their present circumstances.

**Conclusion:** The pilgrims learned to meet these struggles with specific songs—songs that helped them respond to their struggles and prepared them to meet with God. We are looking forward to gaining an insightful glimpse into the heartfelt music of Israel’s pilgrims and learn of the parallels of their pilgrimages to our own heavenward journey.

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