

INTRODUCTION

The Psalms were the divinely inspired hymnbook for the public worship of God in ancient Israel (1 Chronicles 16:8–36). Because psalms were not simply read, but sung, they penetrated the minds and imaginations of the people as only music can do. They so saturated the heart and imagination of the average person that when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was only natural that the crowd would spontaneously greet him by reciting a line from a psalm (Mark 11:9; Psalm 118:26).

The early Christians sang and prayed the psalms as well (Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:26). When Benedict formed his monasteries he directed that the psalms all be sung, read, and prayed at least once a week. Throughout medieval times the psalms served as the most familiar part of the Bible for most Christians. The Psalter was the only part of the Bible a lay Christian was likely to own. At the time of the Reformation, the psalms played a major role in the reform of the church. Martin Luther directed that “the whole Psalter, psalm by psalm, should remain in use.” John Calvin prescribed metrical psalms as the main diet of song in worshipping congregations.¹ Calvin wrote: “The design of the Holy Spirit [was] . . . to deliver the church a common form of prayer.”²

All theologians and leaders of the church have believed that the Psalms should be used and reused in every Christian’s daily private approach to God and in public worship. We are not simply to read psalms; we are to be immersed in them so that they profoundly shape how we relate to God. The psalms are the divinely ordained way to learn devotion to our God.

Why? One reason is that it is what Luther called a “mini Bible.” It gives an overview of salvation history from creation through the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, the establishment

of the tabernacle and temple, the exile due to unfaithfulness, and it points us forward to the coming messianic redemption and the renewal of all things. It treats the doctrines of revelation (Psalm 19), of God (Psalm 139), and of human nature (Psalm 8) and sin (Psalm 14).

The psalms are more than just an instrument for theological instruction, however. One of the ancient church fathers, Athanasius, wrote, “Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book [the psalms] you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you . . . learn the way to remedy your ill.”³ Every situation in life is represented in the book of psalms. Psalms anticipate and train you for every possible spiritual, social, and emotional condition—they show you what the dangers are, what you should keep in mind, what your attitude should be, how to talk to God about it, and how to get from God the help you need. “They put their undeviating understanding of the greatness of the Lord alongside our situations, so that we may have a due sense of the correct proportion of things.” Every feature and circumstance of life is “transmitted into the Lord’s presence, and put into the context of what is true about him.”⁴ Psalms, then, are not just a matchless primer of teaching but a medicine chest for the heart and the best possible guide for practical living.

In calling psalms “medicine” I am trying to do justice to what makes them somewhat different from other parts of the Bible. They are written to be prayed, recited, and sung—to be *done*, not merely to be read. Theologian David Wenham concludes that using them repeatedly is a “performative act” that “alters one’s relationship [with God] in a way mere listening does not.”⁵ We are, in a sense, to put them inside our own prayers, or perhaps to put our prayers inside them, and approach God in that way. In doing this the psalms involve the speaker directly in new attitudes, commitments, promises, and even emotions. When, for example, we do not merely read Psalm 139:23–24—“search me . . . test me . . . see if there is any offensive way in me”—but pray it, we

invite God to test our motives and we give active assent to the way of life called for by the Bible.⁶

The psalms lead us to do what the psalmists do—to commit ourselves to God through pledges and promises, to depend on God through petition and expressions of acceptance, to seek comfort in God through lament and complaint, to find mercy from God through confession and repentance, to gain new wisdom and perspective from God through meditation, remembrance, and reflection.

The psalms also help us see God—God not as we wish or hope him to be but as he actually reveals himself. The descriptions of God in the Psalter are rich beyond human invention. He is more holy, more wise, more fearsome, more tender and loving than we would ever imagine him to be. The psalms fire our imaginations into new realms yet guide them toward the God who actually exists. This brings a reality to our prayer lives that nothing else can. “Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us. . . . What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.”⁷

Most of all the psalms, read in light of the entire Bible, bring us to Jesus. The psalms were Jesus’s songbook. The hymn that Jesus sang at the Passover meal (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) would have been the Great Hallel, Psalms 113–118. Indeed, there is every reason to assume that Jesus would have sung all the psalms, constantly, throughout his life, so that he knew them by heart. It is the book of the Bible that he quotes more than any other. But the psalms were not simply sung by Jesus; they also are about him, as we will see throughout this volume.

The psalms are, then, indeed the songs of Jesus.