

THE BOOKS OF POETRY: Psalms

We're taking a bird's-eye view of this holy Book -- "holy" because it says in its pages that it is "God-breathed." That is, He hand-picked 40 authors from many walks of life, spanning some 1,600 years, to capture in words what He wants us to know about Himself, the universe, time and eternity, and His master plan for people everywhere.

The 39 books of the O.T. were written mostly in Hebrew. They start with creation, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, on through Noah and the flood, Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt through the Red Sea, past Mt. Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (not the 10 Suggestions!), and concluding with the Jews crossing the Jordan River and occupying Canaan, the Promised Land.

The other half of the Bible is The New Testament. Its 27 books were written in Greek. They start by describing the birth of Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who was born, believe it or not, to a virgin Jewish teenager named Mary. He was raised in His earthly dad Joseph's carpentry shop. At age 30 He came out of the closet, so to speak, and began to preach and perform miracles for three years, covering an area spanning about 40 miles north-to-south.

With their land occupied by Roman invaders, the Jews were hoping Jesus would overthrow the evil foreigners, turn 'em all into a giant Caesar salad, and set up His kingdom and usher in an age of peace. When He told them His kingdom was "not of this world," they grew impatient. The local religious mafia dons were exceedingly jealous of His knowledge of the Old Testament, of His miracle-working powers and of His influence over the throngs that followed Him from town to town. Ultimately, they leaned on the local governor to condemn Jesus to death by crucifixion, a cruel execution reserved for crooks.

On the third day after Christ had died and been buried, He came back to life and appeared to some 500 witnesses. Belief in His resurrection is the nothing-else-matters hinge of the entire Bible.

After walking and talking among the locals for several days, Jesus literally ascended to heaven where, the Bible says, He is making preparations to welcome those who trust Him with their lives, accepting by faith that His death paid the penalty once-for-all for the sins of all mankind. That's what is called "The Gospel." The Bible says that by truly believing the truth of the Gospel, we establish a permanent, personal relationship with God.

The rest of the New Testament records the rapid spread of Christianity from Jerusalem throughout the then-known world. It concludes with the majestic account of Jesus Christ's return to earth at some future, yet-to-be-announced date, at which time He *will* set up His kingdom on this planet -- just as the Jews had hoped He would 2,000 years ago.

THE PSALMS

Today we'll breeze through all 150 chapters of the Bible's longest book, Psalms, Israel's songbook. In Hebrew it's called Tehillim, meaning *psalms of praise*. Some have called this "the best loved book of the Old Testament." It's literally a book of sacred songs, poems and prayers which cover the broad themes of praise, prayer and worship. They mirror almost every conceivable human situation -- from winning your own personal Super Bowl to being mired in

the depths of despair. They paint a montage of God's people -- their struggles, sins, sorrows, aspirations, joys, gratitude, failures and victories.

Many think Psalms was written entirely by David, the shepherd lad who later became Israel's second king, following Saul to the throne. It's true that he's the principal writer, credited with authoring 73 of these hymns. David is a remarkable, Renaissance man -- known for his fearless bravery, military genius and peerless statesmanship. He was also a poet and musician with an orchestra of 4,000 musicians who performed these psalms on holy days. Hebrew poetry is *lyrical* because it was meant to be accompanied by music on the lyre.

Despite David's legendary one-night stand with Bathsheba and subsequent conspiracy that led to rubbing out Bathsheba's husband, the Bible describes David as "a man after God's own heart." If there's hope for David, there's hope for each of us.

Fifty other psalms are by unknown authors. Moses wrote Psalm 90. Solomon wrote Psalms 72 and 127. The rest were penned by musicians of the court and the temple. It's believed that the Psalms were written over a period of some 700 years.

Major themes in the Psalms include:

- Trust -- Whatever the occasion, be it a time for "high fives" or "run for your life," David literally placed his total well-being in the hands of God.
- Praise -- David knew where his strength and hope came from, and he regularly acknowledged God as the source of his life.
- Rejoice -- No matter how grim things looked for David, he repeatedly affirmed his devotion to God -- and found his joy in Him.
- Mercy -- David often sang of God's justice, righteousness and wrath. But he relied heavily on God's dealing with him and his nation based on compassion.

Millions have learned to pray by "praying the Psalms," finding here the words to express to God how they truly feel. Many may feel that only good people, only religious people, maybe only priests and rabbis and preachers are capable of praying to God. Somewhere along the line they picked up the notion that there's some special prayer argot, or jargon, some "insider" language that's the key to getting God's attention.

But the Psalms show us that prayer is simply the honest, personal response to God and the events, people and circumstances He sends or allows to enter our lives. Whatever emotional frame of mind we're in -- anger, doubt, fear, joy, frustration -- God wants us to open up and be honest with Him, trusting Him that He'll be big enough to handle whatever's on our mind. After all, He *is* God, and He knows our thoughts anyway! While these songs cover the gamut of human feelings, what they all have in common is this: the writer brought his feelings to God! That's the point. God cares about how we feel, and He loves to have us unload on Him.

Today let's read a few of the Psalms to see if we can capture the flavor of this magnificent, divinely-inspired literature which Jesus Himself often quoted on earth -- and of which W.E.

Gladstone said, “All the wonders of Greek civilization heaped together are less wonderful than is this simple Book of the Psalms.”

Let’s start with Psalm 1 whose author is anonymous.

Next, Psalm 14, one of David’s “biggest hits.” Many are trapped into thinking that believing in God is strictly an intellectual decision. Sometimes *not* believing in God has a lot more to do with our will than it does with our perceived “lack of evidence.”

David’s Psalm 16 has special meaning for my wife Liz and me. The night before she had surgery for cancer in 1992, not knowing what lay ahead, she asked me to read this psalm to her just hours before we left home for Swedish Hospital.

Psalm 19, also by David, is worthy of an Imax treatment. If you’re a serious seeker of God, and if you haven’t decided to trust Him with your life yet, here’s an idea. After reading this psalm, look up at the next starry sky and say, “If you’re there, God, and if you created all this, then make yourself known to me.” There very likely won’t be a flash of lightning, but as you keep your mind and heart open to Him and continue to read His messages to you in the Bible, you can expect God to start getting through to you.

Psalm 23 is the perhaps the best loved chapter in all of the Old Testament. David may have composed it while still a young shepherd, tending his father Jesse’s flocks on the very field where 1,000 years later the angels announced the birth of Jesus. This peaceful picture of a caring shepherd is an unforgettable snapshot of God. So many of us have lived most of our lives thinking of Him as some angry ogre. After reading this psalm, we’ll check out John 10:1-18.

Finally, one of David’s “golden oldies,” Psalm 139. Each of us can think of some feature or characteristic about ourselves we’d like to change. This psalm lets us in on the fact that God took special note of each one of us from earliest times -- and that we’re never out of His thoughts and special care. This song of comfort and profound insight concludes with one of the Bible’s most poignant prayers.

His Deal

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www.HisDeal.org

george@HisDeal.org

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