



Summary of Psalms 1-41

Psalm 1

The first psalm serves as the gateway into the entire book of Psalms, stressing that those who would worship God genuinely must embrace his Law or Torah, i.e. his covenant instruction. This psalm takes topics found in wisdom literature such as Proverbs and makes them the subject of song; the purpose is that those who sing the psalm will own its values – namely, they will want more and more to be people who love the Torah, who believe it, who see themselves as the heirs and stewards of its story of redemption and hope, and who seek to carry out its moral requirements. They can delight in the idea of being among the righteous, feeling that nothing can compare with such blessedness. By its sustained contrast, the psalm reminds readers that in the end there are really only two ways to live. Authorship is unattributed but is believed to be either David or Ezra.

Psalm 2

When the people of God sing Psalm 2, they remind themselves of how God made David and his descendants to be kings in order to enable them to fulfil the very purpose for which Abraham was called, i.e. to bring blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Thus it can be called a royal psalm with authorship attributed to David. The pious Israelite realises that his hope of blessing is now irrevocably tied to the house of David, as confirmed by 2 Samuel 7:12-16, and so he prays that God will keep the king pure.

At a time when the Gentile kingdoms that are part of the Davidic Empire seek to throw off Israelite rule, this psalm recalls the promises made to the Davidic king at his coronation and notes that the Gentiles will find lasting joy only as subjects of this king. With its prospect of a worldwide rule for the house of David, the psalm also looks to the future, when the Davidic Messiah will indeed accomplish this; in fact, the scope of such an accomplishment calls for a ruler who is more than a mere man as, of course, became true in Jesus of Nazareth.

Psalm 3 - A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom.

This is the first psalm with a title. The title also names David as the author and ties the psalm to the occasion of Absalom's rebellion as recorded in 2 Samuel Chapters 15-16, although this need not mean that David actually composed it then.

As explained in the Authorship, Occasion, and Date in the Introduction to the Psalms on the website, David as author is the representative of God's people. Readers must discern whether the emphasis is on his role as the ruler of God's people, in which case the congregation joins in offering his prayer, or else on David as the ideal member of the people of God, with the song being well-adapted for the use of Israelites in their various kinds of distress. The second option seems more likely, and thus the psalm can be considered an individual lament. The purpose, then, of the information in the title is to add concreteness: here is how David models genuine faith in his dire straits, and readers can learn to do the same in theirs.

Psalm 4 - To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.

This psalm expresses quiet trust amid troubling circumstances, combining the categories of individual lament and confidence. Many take this as a companion to Psalm 3 because 4:8 seems to echo 3:5. If there is a connection, the past tense of 3:5 sets it in the morning, while the future tense of 4:8 sets it in the evening; any further connection is speculative.

Psalm 5 - To the leader: for the flutes. A Psalm of David.

This is another individual lament, and the first instance of a psalm with prayers for the personal downfall of the enemies. As indicated in the Literary Features section of the Introduction to the Psalms on the website, such psalms have in view a situation where one is faced with bloodthirsty and deceitful persecutors. David is the attributed author, but there is no information on whether a particular experience of his was the occasion for the psalm.

Psalm 6 - To the leader: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

This is an individual lament, also from David. It is especially suited to one whose hard circumstances have led him to see his sins and to repent of them. For this reason Psalm 6 is often included in the 'Penitential Psalms', i.e. Psalms 32, 38, 51, 130 and 143.

Psalm 7 - A Shiggaion of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning Cush, a Benjaminite.

This is another individual lament from David. The title refers to an otherwise unknown incident in his life when a man of the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe of King

Saul, slandered David. The psalm provides a vehicle by which those unfairly criticised and persecuted may call to God for help.

Psalm 8 - To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

This is a hymn of praise, enabling the Lord's people to celebrate their privileged place in the created order, which speaks of the glorious Creator. Genesis Chapters 1-2 lie behind the words here, especially in presenting mankind as the pinnacle of the creation week, as the rulers over the animal world, and as the object of God's special attention. At the same time, the mention of foes, the enemy, and the avenger (v.2), as well as the covenantal name Lord (v.1 and v.9), show that readers cannot ignore Genesis Chapter 3 and God's plan for fallen mankind.

Although the psalm is covenantal, and thus specifically for Israelite voices to sing, it nevertheless speaks of man in general terms, including all humanity. Israel's calling was to be the first fruits of restored humanity; thus the Israelite worshipper could embrace his dignity and seek to live worthily of it. This points the way to understanding how Hebrews 2:6-8 uses vv.4-6: Jesus, as the Davidic king, is the ideal Israelite, and thus the ideal human being, in this case by being crowned with glory and honour after his suffering on behalf of mankind.

Psalm 9 - To the leader: according to Muth-labben. A Psalm of David.

Psalms 9 and 10 together follow a basically alphabetical acrostic pattern, i.e. literary compositions in which the writer has used the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the initial letters for a sequence of verses, with Psalm 10 beginning where Psalm 9 leaves off. The acrostic is not perfect, however: several letters of the alphabet are missing or are out of order. Further, Psalm 10 lacks a title, which is unusual for this section of the Psalter. Both psalms refer to God's interest in 'the oppressed' (9:9 and 10:18), both mention 'times of trouble' (9:9 and 10:1), both call on God to 'rise up' (9:19 and 10:12), and both are sure that God will not 'forget the afflicted' (9:12 and 10:12). Thus it is not surprising that the Greek and Latin versions have these combined as a single psalm.

On the other hand, there are enough differences to justify finding two songs here: the tone of Psalm 9 is predominantly praise and thanks, while that of Psalm 10 is largely lament. Further, whereas in Psalm 9 the enemies are clearly Gentiles (vv.5-8, vv.15-16 and vv.19-20), in Psalm 10 they may be faithless Israelites, see especially 10:4 and 10:13, with 'the nations' being mentioned in 10:16 to show that the faithless are imitating the wicked Canaanites.

Thus these two psalms are probably best taken as companions placed together in light of their similarities. Psalm 9 praises God for the success of the Davidic king in defending Israel from its Gentile foes. The 'I' in this psalm is either David as the representative of the people, or each member of Israel, who celebrates the blessings that come to him by way of the whole nation's success.

Psalm 10

Psalm 10 is a lament, designed for cases in which ‘the wicked hotly pursue the poor’ (v.2). These wicked could be faithless, wealthy Israelites (v.4 and v.13), and the poor are the defenceless pious. While it was the task of the Davidic king to ensure justice, by force if necessary, it was the task of the general public to pray, and thus to use a psalm like this.

Because this psalm has no title, and is placed in the midst of several psalms that do, and because it shares some similar themes with Psalm 9, some commentators and theologians have thought that it was originally the second half of Psalm 9. There are more reasons to doubt this than to believe it; this psalm rightly stands on its own as a psalm of lament at the seeming prosperity of the wicked, but ultimate confidence in the judgements of God.

Psalm 11 - To the leader. Of David.

This psalm expresses the confidence that the faithful may have, even in a time of severe crisis – and crisis seems to be its proper setting (vv.1-3). This may or may not be tied to a particular event in David’s life, but that really does not matter, as the psalm is adaptable to a variety of desperate situations, showing how to face them in faith.

Psalm 12 - To the leader: according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

This is a community lament, suited to occasions when the people of God are dominated by liars in positions of authority. It is not clear whether these liars are unfaithful Israelites or Gentile oppressors; the psalm works for either situation.

Psalm 13 - To the leader. A Psalm of David.

This is an individual lament for circumstances where the worshipper is on the verge of despair, his powers of endurance spent.

Psalm 14 - To the leader. Of David.

This is a community lament in which the people of God mourn the fact that humans in general do not seek after God and thus they treat God’s people cruelly. It is almost identical to Psalm 53, which was probably an alternate version of the hymn prior to both of them being collected into the Psalter.

Psalm 15 - A Psalm of David.

This is a hymn celebrating the ideal worshipper of the Lord. Some call it an entrance liturgy, prescribing questions and answers by which the priests examine would-be worshippers for their qualifications for entering holy space. This is unlikely, however, since the qualities described in this hymn are matters of the heart, and thus no priest could know whether or not they were present. Similar

passages appear in Psalm 24:3-6 and Isaiah 33:14-16. The singing congregation does not claim to have achieved these character qualities; instead, in describing them, the members yearn to have them more and more.

In this Psalm, David meditates over the character of the man received into the presence of God. No precise occasion is associated with this Psalm, but it may well have been to do with the transporting of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (2 Samuel Chapter 6). This was a time when David was very much concerned with the questions asked and answered in this Psalm.

Psalm 16 - A Miktam of David.

When the faithful sing Psalm 16, they entrust themselves to the Lord and foster their confidence and contentment in his care. The Psalm uses imagery from Israel's allocation of the land (vv.5-6) to express contentment in this life, and goes on to look forward to everlasting life in God's presence (vv.9-11).

The title *Miktam* is commonly understood as golden; although others think it is related to a word meaning to cover. Since the Psalms with this title, i.e. 16 and 56-60, are written in times of peril, some think the idea is of covering the lips in the sense of secrecy, as if this were a secret or silent Psalm given in a time of crisis. This is a wonderful Psalm relating how David found the secret of contentment and great gladness even in pressing times; and also speaks powerfully of Jesus and his work for humankind.

Psalm 17 - A Prayer of David.

This is an individual lament, especially geared toward cases in which the person suffering considers himself unjustly accused of wrong, thus resembling Psalm 7, this time by a worldly enemy. The Psalm is a prayer for vindication, which ends by expressing confidence in the true portion of the faithful, thus resembling Psalm 16. It cannot be identified with a particular incident in David's life for there were too many circumstances that could have led to such words being penned, although there are those that believe it relates to the time when David was being hunted by Saul. This Psalm is remarkable for its trust in God, its lack of confidence in self, and in its glorious heavenly hope.

Psalm 18 - To the leader. A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who addressed the words of this song to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.

This is a royal Psalm, i.e. it celebrates the way that God has shown his love to his people by giving them the Davidic monarchy and by preserving David through many dangers, as shown in the title and v.50. The text of the Psalm is almost identical to 2 Samuel Chapter 22. The two songs differ, however, in their context: Second Samuel Chapter 22 is David's personal expression of gratitude to the Lord, while

Psalm 18 is the adaptation of that song for the whole people to sing, because their well-being is now tied to the offspring of David as promised in 2 Samuel 7:4-17.

When God's people sang this they were to give thanks for the Davidic line and to pray that its heirs would be faithful to the Lord and would be valiant military leaders, so that Israel might carry out its God-given purpose of bringing light to the Gentiles. The ultimate heir of the Davidic line would be the Messiah Jesus.

Psalm 19 - To the leader. A Psalm of David.

In singing this Psalm, God's people celebrate his Law, the Torah, as his supreme revelation of himself. The Psalm recounts the way the creation speaks of its Maker (vv.1-6), and then the way in which the Mosaic Law addresses the soul (vv.7-11), followed by the humble response that this calls for (vv.12-14). As Moses does in Genesis Chapters 1-2, the Psalm identifies the transcendent Creator, i.e. God in v.1, with the covenant God of Israel, that is, the Lord in vv.7-9.

Psalm 20-21 - To the leader. A Psalm of David.

Psalms 20-21. These two Psalms form a pair of royal Psalms. Psalm 20 is a prayer that God will give success to the Davidic king, particularly in battle. Psalm 21 gives thanks to God for answering the request of Psalm 20.

Psalm 22 - To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

This psalm has the appearance of an especially anguished individual lament, where the suffering comes from the attacks of unscrupulous people and is intensified by the mockery of those who should feel sympathy; this person, nevertheless, looks forward to vindication and joyful worship with the rest of God's people. However, in view of its prominent place in the crucifixion story, Christian readers have found in it a description of the sufferings of Jesus. Many Christians have taken it as a straight prediction of Jesus' sufferings, as if the primary function of the psalm was to foretell the work of the Saviour; others have read it as a lament in its OT context, with a 'fuller meaning' revealed by Jesus' use of it.

It is better to see the psalm as providing a lament for the innocent sufferer, and then to see how all the Gospels use this to portray Jesus as the innocent sufferer par excellence. Consider how Matthew Chapter 27 uses the psalm. Matthew 27:35 echoes Psalm 22:18 (dividing the garments by lot); Matthew 27:39 echoes Psalm 22:7 (wagging heads); Matthew 27:43 echoes Psalm 22:8 (the derisive challenge for God to rescue him); and Matthew 27:46 cites Psalm 22:1 (Jesus crying out). Matthew presents Jesus as a thoroughly good and faithful person who is brutally and unjustly executed, and mocked by those who should have supported him.

However, this portrayal of Jesus in light of Psalm 22 allows Christ's followers as well to expect some kind of vindication, as vv.22-31 describe; and they are not disappointed as they read the resurrection account. Hebrews 2:12 cites Psalm

22:22, from the vindication section, to show that Jesus shares the humanity of his followers, since he calls them ‘brothers.’ To make this argument, the author of Hebrews must also see Jesus as the ideal human being, which means he is using the psalm much as the Gospels do.

Psalm 23 - A Psalm of David.

This hymn is usually classified as a psalm of confidence in the Lord’s care. It uses two images: the Lord as Shepherd who cares for the sheep (vv.1-4), and the Lord as host who cares for his guest (vv.5-6).

These images would be familiar from everyday experience, including David’s own as a shepherd boy: <<***But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it>>*** (1 Samuel 17:34-35); but they also evoke other ideas common in the ancient Near East, including the OT, with the deity as shepherd of his people and the deity as host of the meal.

In worship, the faithful celebrate God’s greatness and majesty; and when they sing this psalm, they see his majesty in the way he personally attends to each of his covenant lambs. He is the shepherd for Israel as a whole; and in being such, he is the shepherd for each faithful Israelite as well.

Psalm 24 - Of David. A Psalm.

This psalm seems fitted for some liturgical occasion, perhaps one that celebrates the way that David brought the ark of the Lord into Jerusalem (2 Samuel Chapter 6); this would explain the interest in God’s presence in Psalm vv.3-6, and the address to the gates in vv.7-10. The psalm asserts the astounding idea that the God who created and owns everything is the very same God into whose presence the faithful worshipper enters because of the covenant with Israel. Such is the privilege of being Israel, and such too defines their mission, namely, to bring God’s fame to all his creation, and especially to all mankind.

Psalm 25 - Of David.

This is a lament in which individual members of the worshipping assembly ask God for help in their various troubles. While it expresses faith in God’s kindness toward the faithful, it does not end in the confident way of most laments. The psalm also includes penitential elements, where the worshippers confess their sins and pray for forgiveness (vv.6-7, v.11 and v.18). As the comments will show, there are echoes of Pentateuch promises here, showing that the godly in Israel were to view the Sinai covenant as a gracious one.

This psalm is acrostic, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This is the first psalm that is a consistent acrostic. Like other acrostics attributed to David (Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112 and 145), this does not perfectly follow the acrostic pattern: the verse beginning with w, which should be between vv.5-6, is missing; v.18 begins with the letter r, as does v.19, while q is expected; and v.22 begins with p, as does v.16. The acrostic pattern makes it harder for the poem to have a clear flow of thought, but the comments will show that the poet nevertheless provided one.

Psalm 26 - Of David.

A variety of settings for Psalm 26 have been suggested, such as a prayer for public exoneration offered by someone seriously or falsely accused of wrongdoing; or perhaps part of an entrance liturgy by which pilgrims came into the sanctuary. There is scant evidence for any of these, though the latter is helpful because it links the theme with that of Psalms 15 and 24. That is, the psalm mirrors for those who attend worship what the ideal covenant participant should actually look like.

Some have taken the claims of innocence here as a kind of self-righteous boasting, but this is a mistake. First, the mention of God's steadfast love and faithfulness (v.3), a clear echo of Exodus 34:6, shows that divine grace is the foundation for holy living; similarly, the references to worship in God's house (vv.6-8) indicate that the covenantal means of grace, with their focus on atonement and forgiveness, are in view; and third, singing this psalm serves to enable worshipers more and more to like and embrace the ideal of faithful covenant membership, but it does not make achieving that ideal a precondition for true worship.

Psalm 27 - Of David.

In singing Psalm 27, God's people have a way of not simply expressing confidence in him but of cultivating that confidence for the widest range of challenging life situations. The psalm uses several synonyms for enemies, giving it the concrete setting of a faithful person beset by those who would destroy him with bloodthirsty and deceitful means; one who can trust God in those circumstances can trust him in other situations as well.

Psalm 28- Of David.

This is a lament, a cry for help amid the threat posed by evildoers. It is not clear whether the threat is to the individual or to the whole community; if the speaker is a representative figure like King David, he could be speaking both for himself and for the community. It is probably best to see the hostility as a threat to the whole community (vv.8-9), which each of the faithful is personally involved in, indicated by the references to 'I', 'me', and 'my' throughout.

Psalm 29 - A Psalm of David.

This is a hymn of praise to God for his awesome power, where a thunderstorm serves as a visible emblem of God's majestic voice. It was once common to think that this psalm was based on a Canaanite or Phœnician original, but the evidence for this is poor. It seems reasonable, however, to suppose that the setting of the psalm in a thunderstorm deliberately sets Yahweh over Baal, the storm-god widely worshipped in Syria-Palestine. Biblical authors do not present the phenomena of nature in themselves as problems; they are God's creation, serve his purposes, and demonstrate his power, wisdom, glory, faithfulness, and even love.

This psalm is notable in its emphasis on the name 'The Lord', i.e. Yahweh, using it some 18 times in these 11 verses. This is the name taken by the covenant God of Israel, rendered by the Jews with the replacement word Lord out of reverence to the holy name.

Psalm 30 - A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the temple. Of David.

The title in the NRSVA states this psalm was written after David was recovering from a serious illness, yet it is accepted that David composed Psalm 30 for the dedication of the temple, an event that took place after David died; refer to 1 Kings 8:63. Some verses seem to indicate that David also alluded to the dedication of his newly built palace in Jerusalem.

The temple does not figure much in the psalm itself, except for the address to fellow worshippers in v.4. The theme of the whole psalm is one of personal thanksgiving for God's repeated care and deliverance over the course of a life; the title makes the concrete situation of David's experience of having survived a life-threatening situation the background, and the worshippers can liken their own experiences to his.

Psalm 31 - To the leader. A Psalm of David.

This is a lament that seeks help from God for a faithful person worn out with trouble and beset by enemies who want to do him harm. It is not hard to connect many of the particulars with the life of David, the author; but the wording is general enough for all kinds of people to find themselves in this prayer.

Psalm 32 - Of David. A Maskil.

This is usually classified as a thanksgiving hymn, in which the worshippers give thanks to God for the joy of having their sins forgiven. Because of v.3 <<**while I kept silent**>>, it has been common to connect this psalm with Psalm 51; but as there is no clear indication of this from either the title of the psalm or its body, it is better to take this psalm as geared more generally to the experience of confession and forgiveness. Psalm 32 can be classified as a penitential psalm.

Psalm 1 tells the way to be blessed: <<*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night*>>. Yet if one has failed to do this and fallen into sin, Psalm 32 shows another way to be blessed, to make full confession and repentance of sin.

Psalm 33

This is a hymn of praise to the God who made all things, who rules all things for his own purposes, and who has chosen a people to be his own for the sake of the whole world. The texts in Genesis that convey these notions underlie the psalm's ideas. The thought flows from the call to praise God, to several reasons for praise, to a closing filled with joyful and peaceful hope.

Psalm 34 - Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.

This psalm is an expression of thanksgiving for God's protection and care for those who trust in him. There is also a 'wisdom' section embedded in the thanksgiving (vv.11-14); it is appropriate, because it is the 'wise', i.e. those who live out their trust in God, who have occasion to give such thanks. This psalm is acrostic, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Like other Davidic acrostics, Psalm 34 is imperfect: the w-verse is missing between vv.5-6, and the last verse begins with p, as confirmed by Psalm 25:22.

The title connects the psalm to 1 Samuel 21:10-15, where David is delivered from danger by feigning madness in the presence of King Achish of Gath. Probably the name Abimelech in the psalm is a title or alternate name for the king of Gath. This was a narrow escape, and David does not take credit for it; nor does he deny the importance of the faithful using their wits in desperate situations.

Psalm 35 - Of David.

This psalm shows how the faithful should pray when they know that malicious people are seeking to harm them. The prayer recounts the evil schemes of the persecutors and asks God to fight on behalf of his faithful ones.

Psalm 36 - To the leader. Of David, the servant of the Lord.

This is a lament that reflects on the wicked who oppose the faithful, and on the steadfast love of the Lord; it concludes with a prayer that God in his steadfast love will protect his people from the attacks of the wicked.

Psalm 37 - Of David.

This can be called a wisdom psalm because it is a hymn that reflects on themes normally dealt with in the Wisdom Literature. In particular, it addresses the problem caused when godless people prosper; it helps the faithful to see that it really is better to stay loyal to the Lord, a loyalty expressed in contentment, honest dealing, generosity, and just speech. The Lord will make the distinction between the two groups clear in his own time, and the faithful must wait patiently.

This psalm has many parallel texts in Proverbs. The psalm follows an acrostic pattern, although it is slightly different from that of Psalms 25 and 34; here each grouping of usually two verses begins with the next successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. True to form for Davidic acrostics, this one is imperfect: the s grouping includes vv.27-29, and there is no 'ayin grouping after it as v.30 begins with p.

Psalm 38 - A Psalm of David, for the memorial offering.

This is a lament that lays a person's troubles before God when that person realises that these troubles result from his own sin. The psalm describes anguish of body and mind, desertion by friends, and how the singer's folly has made him vulnerable to enemies ready to pounce.

Because the psalm acknowledges that the singer's sins lie behind these troubles, it is often called a 'penitential' psalm along with Psalms 6, 32, 51, 130, and 143. Of course, not all troubles result from one's own sins; but this psalm is geared to those that do.

The title associates the psalm with the grain-offerings as described in Numbers 5:26, the portion of the grain offering that the priest burns on the altar; its purpose was probably to 'remind' God that the worshipper had consecrated these gifts of God's own abundant providence.

Psalm 39 - To the leader: to Jeduthun. A Psalm of David.

This psalm allows those who are suffering to express their bewilderment to God. The circumstances of the suffering are left vague, although there is acknowledgment of sin; the focus is on how suffering is a reminder of how fleeting a human life is.

Psalm 40 - To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

This psalm combines two parts: first, it gives thanks for the many past mercies the singer has received from God, and then it presents a fresh instance of need for God's help. Both parts recognise that an individual's experiences of God's mercy can lead to others rejoicing in God.

Psalm 41 - To the leader. A Psalm of David.

This is a lament in which a person who fulfils his responsibilities to the poor, and yet is suffering severely, prays for God's help and vindication. The psalm describes a serious illness but can be applied more generally if the illness is taken as simply one example of severe suffering.