

## Psalms – “The Heart Cries to God”

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The Psalms are Hebrew poetry. As such they are very different from narratives, prophetic works, the Gospels and the epistles. Hebrew poetry, in contrast to English poetry, expresses itself in parallelisms rather than rhyme and meter. As poetry the Psalms share characteristics with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and Job. Yet the Psalms are different from these other Hebrew poetic books. Each Psalm is a complete unit in itself, and within the Psalter, there are very different types of Psalms. Each Psalm reflects a heart crying out *honestly* to God – sometimes with thanksgiving, sometimes in praise, and sometimes in complaint!

The Psalms reflect the honest, sincere, “un-put-on” emotions and desire of the psalmist. They are directed to God – like prayer. We can – and should – pray (or sing) them to the Lord as part of our worship as well as to each other (cf. Col 3:16, Eph 5:19). The psalms tend to fall into several categories (though there can be some overlap).

As you look at the following types of psalms, look at two or three in the same category and compare them. What do they share in common? Do they arrange certain parts in a different order? How do they start? How do they end? How is trust in God expressed?

As a believer, how can you internalize and pray to God the psalms you are reading? Can you identify with something that was on the heart of the psalmist? As you see parallels, “*pray*” your Psalm to God as an expression of your heart. Be honest with God – its not like you are keeping anything secret from Him if you aren’t! As you express your “laments” be sure to acknowledge His goodness and wisdom too. As you acknowledge your disappointment, be sure to exercise confidence in Him as well. Take time to purely “worship” Him with a Psalm of praise or thanksgiving, prayed from your heart to Him. Take time to meditate on a Psalm of wisdom.

1. The Lament Psalms are the most common type of psalm. They reflect a heart expressing its suffering, sorrow, complaint or disappointment to the Lord. They can reflect the sentiment of an individual (3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142) or group [community] (12, 44, 80, 94, 137).
2. Thanksgiving Psalms generally have a specific reason for which they are expressing thanks to God, such as his faithfulness, protection, or other benefit. They too may be corporate (65, 67, 75, 107, 124, 136) or personal (18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138).
3. Hymns of praise praise God “for who he is, for his greatness and his beneficence toward the whole earth as well as his own people, . . . or as Creator, . . . or as protector of Israel.” (Cf. 8, 19, 66, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 117, 145-148)
4. Celebration and Affirmation Psalms reflect on God’s providential working in behalf of his people either through his covenant (50, 81, 89, 132), his divinely appointed king (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 144), his enthronement (24, 29, 47, 93, 95-99), or the city of Zion (Jerusalem – 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).
5. Wisdom Psalms praise wisdom and wise living (1, 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 128, 133).
6. Psalms of Trust (11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131) call attention to the fact that “God may be trusted and that even in times of despair, his goodness and care for his people ought to be expressed.”

Quotations from Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1993. Also very helpful is Tremper Longman’s *How to Read the Psalms*, 1988. Classifications of Psalms into categories taken from these works.