

Introduction: Music to God's Ears

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for
the upright to praise him.*

(Psalm 33:1)

God wants to grab your attention. He could hardly have made it any clearer. He made Psalms the central book of the Bible. He made it contain the Bible's middle chapter and middle verse.¹ He made it by far the longest book of the Bible, with more than twice as many chapters as the next longest book. He made it contain the longest chapter in the Bible and then, for effect, he made it home to the shortest chapter too.² He inspired the writers of the New Testament to quote more from Psalms than from any other book in the Old Testament – at least seventy-five times directly and many more times indirectly. So don't miss the many ways that God is shouting for your attention. He has something vitally important to teach you through the book of Psalms.

Psalms is a book which shows us how to relate to God. The fourth-century writer Athanasius observed that this book is unique because, while the rest of the Bible speaks *to* us, Psalms speaks *for* us.³ It teaches us how to relate to God as friends, which is why no other book in human history has been as loved, valued and memorized by so many people from so many different

¹ The middle chapter of the Bible is Psalm 117. The middle verse is Psalm 103:1.

² The longest chapter of the Bible is Psalm 119. The shortest is Psalm 117.

³ He wrote this in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Meaning of the Psalms* in about 370 AD.

nations. The American president John Adams spoke for millions when he told Thomas Jefferson that *“The Psalms of David, in sublimity, beauty, pathos, and originality, or in one word poetry, are superior to all the odes, hymns, and songs in any language.”*⁴ God gave us these 150 worship songs because he wants to teach us how to pray the kind of prayers which are music to his ears.

Psalms makes it clear that God wants us to sing to him. Spiritual discussions and resolutions have their value, but they can never substitute for building a relationship with God through singing simple love songs. One of my friends discovered this when he started coming to some of the meetings at the church I lead. As a typically reserved Englishman, he was so appalled by our worship that he went home and googled *“churches without singing”*. Thankfully, he couldn’t find any, because he later shared at his baptism that it was the sight of hundreds of people singing out their love for God which melted his heart and turned him into a passionate worshipper too.

The Hebrews called Psalms *tehillim*, which means *songs of praise*. The Greeks called it *psalmoi*, which means *songs*, and it is from this that we get our own name for this collection. In case we forget that a relationship with God always involves singing, Psalms tells us that God wants us to worship him *“with stringed instruments”* and on the *“trumpet... harp and lyre... strings and pipe... with resounding cymbals”*.⁵ Shortly after he triggered the greatest Christian revival Europe has ever seen, Martin Luther told his converts that *“Music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil... I would allow no man to preach or teach God’s people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song.”*⁶ We discover this as we read the book of Psalms.

⁴ This quote comes from David McCullough’s biography, simply entitled *John Adams* (2001).

⁵ See the titles of Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67 and 76. See also Psalms 33:1–3, 92:1–3, 144:9 and 150:3–5.

⁶ Quoted by Kenneth W. Osbeck in *“101 Hymn Stories”* (1982).

But don't imagine that Psalms is like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, shutting her eyes to reality by singing about a few of her favourite things. The psalms teach us how to relate to God in the bad times, in the dark times and in times so confusing that we want to throw in the towel on our faith altogether. The psalmists are shockingly honest with God about how they feel, because life isn't always easy. They teach us to sing the blues as well as happy songs because how we worship in the difficult times is just as much music to God's ears. The Christian writer Eugene Peterson confesses that without Psalms he would not know how to keep on worshipping at all:

I need a language that is large enough to maintain continuities, supple enough to express nuances across a lifetime that brackets child and adult experiences, and courageous enough to explore all the countries of sin and salvation, mercy and grace, creation and covenant, anxiety and trust, unbelief and faith that comprise the continental human condition... Where will we acquire a language that is adequate for these intensities? Where else but in the Psalms? For men and women who are called to leadership in the community of faith, apprenticeship in the Psalms is not an option; it is a mandate.⁷

Psalms took almost 1,000 years to write – far longer than any other book in the Bible. Moses wrote Psalm 90 in about 1410 BC and Psalm 137 appears to have been written in about 530 BC. Some time after that, God inspired some of the worship leaders at the Temple in Jerusalem⁸ to compile a collection of 150 of the best psalms from the several thousand which were then in

⁷ Eugene Peterson in *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (1987).

⁸ 1 Chronicles 25:1–6 indicates that some these temple worship leaders were *prophets* and *seers*. They probably divided Psalms into five books in order to mirror the five books of the Jewish Torah.

circulation.⁹ Some of the psalms they collated were already part of mini-collections,¹⁰ but God inspired them to gather them into the five books which make up Psalms in order to teach us how to pray and worship.

Book I comprises **Psalms 1–41** and it focuses on the character of God in order to teach us how to **sing about who God is**. Book II comprises **Psalms 42–72** and it teaches us how to **sing when times are hard**. Book III comprises **Psalms 73–89** and it models how God wants you to **sing out how you really feel**. Book IV comprises **Psalms 90–106** and it charts the history of God’s dealings with the human race so that we can learn to **sing about God’s plan**. Book V comprises **Psalms 107–150** and it ends the book of Psalms with a call for you to **sing your response to God**.

It’s very tempting to ignore the way that the Temple worship leaders structured Psalms and to study its contents by theme, but I am convinced that this structure is our God-given commentary on the meaning of these worship songs. Throughout this book we will therefore resist the urge to pluck a few favourite verses out of context, looking instead at each psalm or cluster of psalms as a unit which teaches us a particular lesson about how we are to worship God. As we do so, we will learn how we can get to know God deeply as our friend, as did the writers of the psalms.

Make no mistake about it: God wants to grab your attention. He wants to teach you how to grow in a relationship with him. He wants to teach you how to sing the kind of worship songs which have always been, in every generation, sweet music to God’s ears.

⁹ There are many psalms in Scripture which were not included in the book of Psalms: see Exodus 15:1–21, Deuteronomy 31:30–32:47, Judges 5:1–31, 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and Isaiah 38:9–20. Similarly, 1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs, but only two of them were included as Psalms 72 and 127.

¹⁰ We can still see the names of these mini-collections in the titles of some psalms, for example, the “songs of ascents”. Psalm 72:20 must have been the end of a mini-collection, since many more psalms of David follow.

When God Seems to Fail (44:1–26)

*You made us retreat before the enemy, and our
adversaries have plundered us.*

(Psalm 44:10)

I can't even begin to imagine what it must have felt like for the disciples when Jesus died. Thomas was so disillusioned that he refused to believe in the resurrection. His friends were so disorientated that they locked their doors and hid in case the Jewish leaders came looking for them. Luke tells us they were miserable.¹ It's easy to see why.

The Sons of Korah clearly felt the same way. We don't know when they wrote Psalm 44 – they may have done so under one of the later kings, but their statement that Israel has not been unfaithful to God's covenant and has not committed idolatry (44:17 and 44:20–21) suggests they may have written it during one of the temporary setbacks which marked the end of David's reign. What we know for sure is that they felt as though the Lord had failed them. Their hopes had been dashed, their faith was in tatters, and they responded in the only way that they knew how. They wrote a psalm of praise to God.

I find it very challenging that the Lord chose to include this song in the book of Psalms instead of a happier, more upbeat song written by one of their contemporaries who put a brave face on the problem and convinced himself that things were fine. God chose to include this song because the

¹ John 20:19, 24–25; Luke 24:17.

Sons of Korah had actually got the right perspective. Israel *had* been defeated. God's promises *hadn't* been fulfilled. And the Lord was looking for people who weren't afraid to say so. Dan Allender observes that:

Christians seldom sing in the minor key. We fear the sombre; we seem to hold sorrow in low esteem. We seem predisposed to fear lament as a quick slide into doubt and despair; failing to see that doubt and despair are the dark soil that is necessary to grow confidence and joy... To sing a lament against God in worship reveals far, far greater trust than to sing a jingle about how happy we are and how much we trust him... Lament cuts through insincerity, strips pretence, and reveals the raw nerve of trust that angrily approaches the throne of grace and then kneels in awed, robust wonder.²

The Sons of Korah tell the Lord that they believe he kept his promises powerfully in the past (44:1-8). Then they tell him straight that in the present it looks as if he has rejected them, abandoned them, scattered them, disgraced them, put them to shame and sold them over to their enemies (44:9-16). The Sons of Korah marked this as a *maskil* or *teaching psalm* for congregational worship because we all need to pray this kind of honest prayer from time to time. In my country, the United Kingdom, in the past fifty years the percentage of people in their twenties who attend church regularly has nosedived from well over 50 per cent to only 3 per cent.³ About a third of churches have no children and over half have no teenagers.⁴ Whatever way we look at that, it's an absolute disaster. God doesn't want

² Dr Dan Allender is a leading Christian psychologist. He wrote this in "The Hidden Hope in Lament", published in the *Mars Hill Review* (Vol. 1, 1994).

³ These figures compare 1955 and 2005. See the report by the UK Evangelical Alliance entitled *The 18-30 Mission: The Missing Generation?* (2005).

⁴ This data is taken from the English Church Census in 2005. 44:1 underlines the scale of this disaster by telling us that the health of the Church requires parents to pass their faith down to the next generation.

us to bury our heads in the sand and to sing chirpy choruses about better days to come. He wants us to sing psalms of lament like the Sons of Korah.

Some of our disasters are more personal. Many of us know terrible suffering in our lives. Psalm 37 promised us peace and prosperity, but many of us are tired of having to pretend that we are doing better than we are. Our business ventures fail. We get sick and aren't healed. Horrible things happen to our loved ones. Some of them die. Is it any wonder that there are so many confused, disillusioned Christians when we very rarely sing psalms of lament when we gather together? Isn't it obvious why God wanted Psalm 44 to be sung regularly by the worshippers at his Temple? Dan Allender continues:

How much of the current counselling frenzy is due to an absence of opportunity to confess our hurt, anger and confusion to God in the presence of others of like mind? In many ways, one role of counselling is to legitimise pain and struggle and focus the questions of the heart towards God. How much better it would be if in concert with others we passionately cried out to God with the energy that is often expressed only in the privacy of the counselling office.

Psalm 44 is an angry psalm. It blames God for our disasters – “you made us retreat” (44:10) – and it even accuses him of not being the good shepherd that we sang about in Psalm 23. The Sons of Korah liken him in 44:11 to a lazy shepherd who lets wolves eat his sheep while he is not looking. Worse, they liken him in 44:12 to a dim-witted shepherd who sends his sheep off to the abattoir and forgets to ask the butcher for any money in return. Far from feeling embarrassed by their anger, the New Testament tells us that this is how we ought to pray in times of trouble too, since Paul quotes from 44:22

in Romans 8:36 as a promise that when we go through hard times we can pray prayers such as this to lay hold of Jesus' unfailing love. Not all anger towards God is good, but it can open up a dialogue which moves our hearts away from our confusion and towards God's solution.

That is exactly what happens to the Sons of Korah as they write their song. They began by confessing that God is the true King of Israel and that they can do nothing without him, and they return to this realization in 44:17-26. They protest that they haven't worshipped idols or stopped believing in God's covenant with Israel (44:17-21). They haven't forgotten that the Lord's name is still the Blood-Drenched Shepherd and the Victor and the Healer (44:20). They recognize that they are suffering because they are caught in the crossfire of a great cosmic battle. They tell the Lord it is "*for your sake*" that they are suffering. The Devil rages against God's People because he knows he cannot lay a finger on God himself.⁵ They call the Lord to *wake up* and to *stop forgetting* them for a moment longer. The final word of the psalm is *hēsēd* or *covenant mercy*.⁶ Because God hasn't changed and nor has his Gospel, they end their song assured that all will be well.

I don't know when you last had a chance to sing a song of lament with other believers in church on Sunday. If you lead worship, you may need to reconsider the breadth of worship themes you use as you lead God's People. If you are a church leader, this kind of singing should certainly characterize many of your prayer meetings. Our churches can often be places where positive messages paste a wafer-thin veneer over the silent despair and confused cries and angry prayers which are just waiting to be sung. There is no need for us to be afraid of

⁵ Revelation 12:13-17. The Devil can't touch Jesus so he attacks those Jesus loves instead.

⁶ Like many of the psalms in Book II, this song does not use the name *Yahweh* at all, but the Sons of Korah do not doubt God's continued covenant with Israel despite the fact that he seems very far-away.

expressing the anger and emotion which runs throughout Psalm 44. When we dare to speak it out honestly, we will discover that it is music to God's ears.

Why Does God Allow Suffering? (73:1–28)

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

(Psalm 73:16–17)

You may think that you hate hypocrisy and playacting, but God wants you to know that he hates it even more. He can't stand it when people pour out empty religious words which don't reflect what they are truly feeling on the inside. Prayer is a two-way conversation in which we express our deepest feelings to the Lord and take time to listen to his reply. That's why Book III of Psalms tells us to sing honestly about how we are really feeling. It tells us that God hates us lying. Even when we do it in church on Sunday.

Those who have understood Psalms best throughout Church history have always been surprised at how raw and honest the psalmists are. John Calvin described Psalms as "*an anatomy of all the parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.*"¹ Athanasius observed that

Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Saviour's coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the

¹ Calvin wrote this in about 1556 in the preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*.

kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries.²

Only one of the seventeen psalms that make up Book III was written by David. All of the others were written by the worship leaders he appointed. It's as if the editors of Psalms grouped these seventeen songs together in order to show us how ordinary men and women should express their ordinary feelings to the Lord.

But expressing our feelings to the Lord is not enough. The psalmists want to help us to be changed even as we pray. John Calvin continues by observing that *"Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need, then from faith in the promises of God. It is by studying these inspired compositions that people will be best awakened to a sense of their maladies and, at the same time, instructed how to find remedies for their cure."* Athanasius adds that *"Whatever your need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill."* Let's therefore learn from these seventeen songs which were written by Asaph, Ethan and the Sons of Korah.³ Let's sing to God about how we really feel and let him change us as we do so.

Asaph wrote the eleven psalms which form the first two-thirds of Book III.⁴ He starts with one of the biggest questions

² Athanasius wrote this in about 370 AD in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Meaning of the Psalms*.

³ Asaph wrote Psalms 73–83, the Sons of Korah wrote Psalms 84–85 and 87–88, David wrote Psalm 86 and Ethan wrote Psalm 89. Since these worship leaders were all Levites, Book III is known as "the Levite Psalter".

⁴ Asaph was the main worship leader at David's Tabernacle, while Ethan and the Sons of Korah led worship at Moses' Tabernacle (1 Chronicles 16:37–42). Once the Temple was built, their three worship choirs came together. Asaph wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73–83.

which can trouble our hearts: Psalm 73 deals with the question, *Why doesn't God stop all the suffering in the world?* He states the general principle in 73:1 that God is good and just, but then launches into thirteen verses of complaint about how he feels when he looks at the suffering all around him. Even though he is one of the main worship leaders at the Temple, he confesses that he almost lost his faith when he saw the wicked prospering (73:2–3) and supposing that God doesn't see the wicked things they do (73:4–12). He confesses that he almost threw in the towel on his faith once and for all (73:13–14).⁵ What is even more shocking than Asaph's direct language is that the Lord seems rather pleased with his honesty in prayer. He calls Asaph a prophet in Matthew 13:35 and looks back fondly in Nehemiah 12:46 to the days when Asaph prayed prayers which were music to his ears!

Unless Asaph had been this honest, he would not have received an answer. The fourth-century theologian Ambrose described psalms like this one as *"A gymnasium which is open for all souls to use, where the different psalms are like different exercises set out before him. In that gymnasium, in that stadium of virtue, he can choose the exercises that will train him best to win the victor's crown."*⁶ The first half of Asaph's prayer is like a workout for his soul, and he reaps the benefit of his exercise in the second half of his prayer. He tells us that when he went into the Temple to meet with God, he started to grasp why he does not always appear to judge the wicked.⁷ He caught a big vision of God which made him realize how blinkered he had

⁵ Asaph is deceived, since God *does* judge the wicked in this life, but that is not the point. This psalm teaches us to express the way we feel, even when our feelings are wrong.

⁶ Ambrose was Archbishop of Milan and wrote this in about 385 AD in his *Commentary on the Psalms*.

⁷ Asaph refers literally in 73:17 to *the sanctuaries of God*. If he wrote during David's reign, he means both Tabernacles, but if he wrote during Solomon's reign, it refers to the different parts of the Temple. Either way, this verse reminds us that we need fellowship with other Christians when we are feeling down.

been (73:15-17).⁸ God will surely judge the wicked swiftly and suddenly (73:18-20),⁹ and Asaph felt as stupid as a donkey not to have seen this all along (73:21-22). He worships the Lord for the fact that ill-earned riches will not last, but that the righteous have the Lord as their portion, both in this life and for evermore (73:23-28).¹⁰ Like Job, Asaph discovers that when he shares his feelings honestly in prayer he receives an answer through a fresh revelation of the Lord which changes everything.

The big question which confronts us in Psalm 73 and the rest of Book III is *Will we pray this way ourselves?* Will we be as bold and honest as Asaph in prayer, or will we fall for the lie that God wants sweet platitudes which masquerade as prayer? When did you last speak to God with the same frank emotion as Asaph in this psalm? Unless you unburden your heart in prayer, you must not be surprised if your prayer life feels repetitive and lifeless. But if you pour out your heart like Asaph, you will discover that emptying your heart enables God to fill it with fresh faith and a fresh desire to worship him. When we express who we really are in prayer, the Lord responds by revealing to us who he really is.

If you are a church leader or a worship leader, God wants to speak to you urgently through Book III. When was the last time you helped your congregation to express their deepest, darkest and most unspoken emotions to God? Let's not short-change those we lead with upbeat songs and well-crafted sermons

⁸ Note Asaph's wisdom in 73:15. As Israel's worship leader, he knows better than to harm those he leads by blurting out his feelings. He does not mark this psalm for congregational singing because leaders need to pray honestly in private so they can share with those they lead what God has said in reply (73:21-28).

⁹ It was this knowledge which helped David in Psalm 37:37-38, Job in Job 27:8 and Solomon in Ecclesiastes 8:12-13, when they prayed their own honest prayers about the injustice in the world.

¹⁰ The Lord had promised in Numbers 18:21-24 and Deuteronomy 10:9 and 18:1-2 to be the Levites' portion instead of giving them land. Asaph is a Levite and he invites us to treat the Lord as our portion too.

while forgetting that their real need is to be taught to pray.¹¹ Let's teach them the message of Book III of Psalms. Let's teach them to sing about the way they really feel.

¹¹ This is even true of non-Christians. 73:17 reminds us that this kind of praying can achieve more breakthrough in their searching than a brilliant lecture in apologetics.