

Introduction to Psalms and Poetry

All 150 Psalms are poetry. In every language poems use the following:

Image: a word phrase that names a concrete action or things. By extension, a character, setting or event can be an image, a concrete embodiment of human experience or an ideal.

Metaphor: an implied comparison that does not use the words 'like' or 'as'. For example, 'the LORD is my shepherd'.

Simile: a figure of speech comparing two things using 'like' or 'as'. For example, 'he is like a tree planted by streams of water'.

Because of common suffixes, many Hebrew words rhyme. Most Hebrew poetry consists of two lines in parallel. There are four types of parallelisms:

Antithetical: the second line states the truth of the first line by contrast.

'for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, / but the way of the wicked will perish',
(Psalm 1:6)

Synonymous: The second line gives the same general idea of the first, but with some variation in words and/or images, but using similar grammar.

'The LORD of hosts is with us; / The God of Jacob is our stronghold',
(Psalm 46:7)

Synthetic (or growing): the second line completes the thought of the first line with no repetition.

'You fixed the earth on its foundations, / forever and ever it shall not be shaken',
(Psalm 104:5)

Climactic: The first line is left incomplete until the second line repeats part of it and adds to it to finish the thought.

'Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty, / Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength',
(Psalm 29:1)

There are many categories of Psalms. We will use these thirteen:

Praise: Magnify the name, majesty and beauty of God, as well as His goodness, greatness and salvation.

Thanksgiving: Acknowledge God's saving help and deliverances on behalf of the individual or nation.

Lament: contain longings for God during times of trial from nature or people, pleas to God for help and affirm faith in God.

Penitential: focus on acknowledging and confessing sin to God.

Sacred history: recount what God has done for His people Israel in the past.

God enthroned as King: boldly declare 'the LORD reigns'!

Worship: composed for special worship times or annual feasts, culminated by Psalms 113-118 which the Jews in Jesus' time always sang at the end of the Passover meal.

Faith and devotional: express confidence in God's integrity and ever present help through devotion to him and His Word.

Pilgrimage: describe going to Jerusalem for the three annual required feasts.

Creation: describe God's handiwork in the heavens and earth.

Wisdom and teaching: reflect on God's ways and instruct about righteous living.

Messianic: describe experiences of David or Solomon that are prophetic and fulfilled in Messiah Jesus.

Imprecatory: these psalms invoke God's curse or judgment on the wicked, but never take this into their own hands, always placing it in God's hands while waiting.

Walter Brueggemann has put these thirteen types in three broad categories he calls: orientation, dis-orientation and re-orientation. For the less scholarly and theologically minded, he says to think of the categories as: Creation, Fall and Redemption.

As we go through the Psalms we will use the following table:

Creation	Fall	Redemption
Creation	Historical	Faith
Wisdom	Imprecatory	King
Worship	Lament	Messianic
	Penitential	Praise
	Pilgrimage	Thanksgiving

For each week we should look for the three common elements of poetry; categorize the different types of parallelism from verse to verse; determine the category and be prepared to discuss the choice (many psalms fit more than one category).

Try to discern the main theme of the psalm.

Finally, record your thoughts as to how the psalm moved you before God and any life lessons you felt you have learned.

We will begin on Wednesday, September 14 with Psalm 1.

Altogether we will look at fifty psalms over fifty weeks. These are the Psalms in numerical order:

1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 15, 16, 19, 21, 23,
24, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 37, 40, 43, 44,
46, 47, 51, 58, 59, 62, 72, 73, 84, 85,
88, 90, 93, 95, 99, 100, 103, 104, 109, 113,
114, 116, 126, 130, 132, 135, 136, 137, 143, 148.

Sources:

The Literary Study Bible, English Standard Version, 2007, Crossway Bibles, ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL; General Editors: Leland Ryken, Philip Graham Ryken; pgs. 1884-85, 1891-92, 1897-98

NIV Life in the Spirit Study Bible, 2003, Life Publishers International, published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI; General Editor: Donald C. Stamps, M.A., M.Div.; pgs 769-70.

The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary, 1984, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, MN; Walter Brueggemann; pgs. 19-21.