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# VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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## LECTURE 15: PSALMS

Lecture Presenter: Robert D. McCurley M.Div.



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# *Module*

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## **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

**30 LECTURES**

***ROBERT D. McCURLEY M.Div.***

**21 CHAPTERS OLD TESTAMENT · 9 CHAPTERS NEW TESTAMENT**

### *Old Testament Lectures:*

1. Introduction
2. Creation
3. Fall
4. Noah
5. Abraham
6. Patriarchs I
7. Patriarchs II
8. Exodus
9. Sinai
10. Tabernacle
11. Sacrifices
12. Priesthood
13. Inheritance
14. David
- 15. Psalms**
16. Solomon
17. Temple
18. Kingdom
19. Prophets
20. Exile
21. Restoration

### *New Testament Lectures:*

22. Incarnation
23. Atonement
24. Resurrection
25. Pentecost
26. Church
27. Union
28. Application
29. Mission
30. Glory

# Lecture 15

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## PSALMS

### *Lecture Theme:*

God provides his church with a permanent book of inspired songs in which we sing to Christ, of Christ and with Christ.

### *Text:*

“And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me” (Luke 24:44).

## TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 15

This is Lecture 15, entitled “Psalms.” Have you ever had a tune stuck in your head, something running in the background of your mind? Music is a powerful thing. If you join words to music, it greatly enhances your ability to remember the words. It makes them stick. Songs shape and mold us. God designed this to be the case. In order to impress His will and Word on our minds, He provided a Book of Songs for the church to memorize and sing. What place does the book of Psalms have in the Bible as a whole, and what use does the New Testament make of the Psalms? Why does God include an inspired Book of Songs in the middle of the Bible? What is the theological content of the Psalms, and how do they relate to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ? What role should the Psalms have in the church and in the Christian life? The Lord wants you to be excited about this book and the important place that it has in your life. The Hebrew title for the book of Psalms means *praises*. God inspired His prophets to compose songs, which were collected into this book, and included it in the canon of Scripture as a precious gift to His church throughout all ages.

In this lecture, we will explore God’s appointed purpose for the Psalms and the content He included in it. It’s essential that we recognize the role of the Psalms within the flow of God’s history of redemption, which is why we devote one whole lecture to it. By the end of this lecture, I hope you will have gained a renewed enthusiasm for how precious this book is to the believer as God’s own Book of Songs.

First of all, the central place of the Psalms. And I want to persuade you of the importance of this amazing book. Not only are the Psalms found in the middle of the Bible, but God gave them a central place within the church throughout redemptive history. Psalms is the Old Testament book most often quoted in the New Testament by far. It’s referred to on an average every 19 verses in the New Testament. So, it has a central place in the New Testament. This alone would require intimate familiarity with them, but they also have a vital place

in Scripture as a whole. The Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, said the Psalms were unlike any other book. He called it a little Bible because the Lord included in concentrated form everything you find elsewhere in the Bible: history, law, prophecy, gospel, the mission to the nations, every aspect of Christ's person and work, all the doctrines of Scripture, every part of the Christian life and experience, and on and on it goes. We will explore the content later in this lecture.

They also have a crucial place in the history of the Old Testament revelation. While most of them were written during the period of David, we have Psalms written from the time of Moses all the way to the Babylonian exile. Several Psalms rehearse the history of the redemption of God's people. They are central to the church in all ages as a permanent manual of inspired songs. Jesus sang them. After all, they were His own songs. The apostles and apostolic church sang them. After the New Testament era, the Psalms were the only hymnbook the church used. In the early centuries of the church, presbyters were required to memorize all 150 Psalms, and they were designed by God for use in the church for the remainder of all of history as we could easily illustrate. The Psalms unite the church throughout the world. Churches in China, Indonesia, Nigeria, Germany, Mexico, and everywhere else should be unified in the sung praise they offer to God in worship through their respective languages, just as they are united in the reading and preaching of the whole Bible. The Psalms also unify the church throughout history. Those in the 21st century are still singing the same inspired praise that was sung through the Old Testament, the New Testament, and all ages of the church.

Lastly, and to this point, they function as vital to the life of the individual believer. John Calvin writes, in the introduction to his commentary on the Psalms, "I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, an anatomy of all 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. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all of the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated." The universal experience of believers confirms this truth. God provide songs for times of sadness, joy, fear, triumph, trust, hope, repentance, and every other part of Christian experience. Whatever our condition, God puts a song in our mouth to express ourselves to Him in worship. So, we see the centrality of the Psalms within the church and the Christian life.

But secondly, we need to consider the theological themes that are found within the book of Psalms. Listen to the words of Basil, one of the early church theologians. He said, "The book of Psalms is a compendium of all divinity, a common store of medicine for the soul, a universal magazine of good doctrines profitable to everyone in all conditions." This is similar to Luther's description of the Psalms as a little Bible. They set forth the mind and heart of God Himself. As Basil said, it is full of good doctrine.

The studying of the theology that is contained in the Psalter will take a lifetime, but we'll highlight a few examples to get us started. But first of all, you should understand something about the structure of the book. The Psalms are divided into five books, if you will. You have Psalms 1 to 41, secondly 42 to 72, thirdly 73 to 89, fourthly 90 to 106, and then the fifth book is Psalm 107–150. Each of the first four books end with a doxology, and then the fifth book concludes with the climax of five psalms of praise, Psalms 146 to 150. As we've already seen, they're composed by several authors, David being chief, and all of them being prophets. Psalm 1 and 2 form two halves and serve as the preface to the whole Psalter, anticipating major themes that permeate the whole book. For example, Psalm 1 focuses on God's Law, and Psalm 2 centers on God's Messiah. Both of them contrast believers who submit to God's law and to Christ and those enemies of God who disobey and rebel.

There are a variety of types of Psalms. Eight Psalms are acrostics. That is that they follow the order of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet through their sequence of verses. We also find the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120 to 134, that the Jewish pilgrims used when ascending to Jerusalem in their pilgrimage. There are also historical Psalms that recollect and rehearse God's dealings with His people in the past. For example, Psalms 105 and 106, and then later Psalm 135 through 137. There are also Psalms of penitence, at least 14, with an emphasis on confessing sin, Psalm 51 being the best known. While every psalm contains revelation of Christ, some are singled out as particular Messianic Psalms with a concentrated focus on God's coming Christ. So, for example, Psalm 42, 45, 69, 72, Psalm 110, Psalm 118, these would be examples.

But we should also highlight a handful of the theological themes that God reveals in the Psalms. Psalms is one of the most Christ-centered books in the Bible. Most of us would have loved to have been with the two

disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus expounded what was written in the Psalms concerning Himself. Hebrews 1 is one of the most potent New Testament chapters on the glory of Christ. When the author of Hebrews determined to establish the supremacy of Christ, he quoted the Psalms 7 times in that brief chapter. Every aspect of the person and work of Christ is covered in the Psalms: His three offices of prophet, priest, and king; various aspects both of his humiliation and exultation; we have his incarnation; his ministry; his betrayal; his atonement and death; his burial and resurrection; his ascension and his reign; we sing of him as Savior and Judge and Shepherd and many other things. We could go on and on, but to illustrate the invaluable place of God's revelation of Christ in the Psalms, did you know that we learn more about Christ's internal experience on the cross in the Psalms than we do in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Without the Psalms, we would have an incomplete knowledge of Christ.

The Psalms are also full of the application of redemption in the gospel. We learn, of course, about election but also of imputation and forgiveness, regeneration, the Christian's justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification. The Psalms are full of the mission of taking the gospel to all the nations of the world. They are, if you will, inspired missionary hymns. Consider Psalm 67 as one prime example. The Psalms are full of the revelation of God: all His names, His attributes, and His works—creation, providence, redemption. You will find nothing missing. For example, God's supreme reign as King is celebrated all through the book, setting forth His comprehensive sovereignty over all things. They also point beyond us into the future of Christ's Church in this age and to the judgment day and heaven and hell to come.

Lastly under this point, we must take up one theme that sets God's songs apart from uninspired hymns of human composition. Namely, the imprecations; imprecations are where God's people are calling down His curses on wicked enemies and foes. This theme permeates the whole book. Perhaps you've wondered why the book called *praises* in Hebrew opens without the word *praise* but instead a detailed contrast between the godly and the wicked, complete with blessings and curses. We finally reach the first mention of praise at the end of Psalm 7, where the name of God most high is praised for His righteousness. You see, these songs focus on God Himself, His name, His character, His thoughts, ways and works, unlike most modern worship songs. David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, was chosen by God as a man after His own heart, whose desires, thoughts, emotions, praises, and prayers were aligned with God's.

Remember the tracing paper illustration from a previous lecture? This clarifies the often-misunderstood place of imprecations all through the Psalms: the believer's desire and prayer for the destruction of wicked enemies and the deliverance and exultation of the righteous. It expresses the mind and will of the believer conformed to God's own mind and will. So, for example, in Psalm 139:19–22, we read, "Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, Oh God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, Oh LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies." Our minds and emotions must be conformed to God's will and most zealous for God's glory. The fact that this theme is entirely absent from uninspired hymns has warped the piety of God's people, a problem unknown to previous ages of the church who used God's songs. God is to be worshiped in the beauty of His holiness, and His righteous wrath and perfect justice are worthy of our praise. Those who feel uncomfortable with this must remember that the saints will sing Alleluias when God judges and destroys His enemies on the Last Day. Consider, for example, Revelation chapter 19. Understanding the theology of the Psalms demonstrates their full sufficiency as songs for the church in every age, which brings us to our third and last point.

We'll consider the Psalms as inspired praise. God has provided the Psalms as a permanent manual of sung praise. This is God's inspired hymnbook for the church in all ages, and we see the basis for this under three points. First of all, regarding inspired prophets, the Bible teaches unequivocally that divine inspiration is a necessary qualification for writing worship songs. There is a connection between prophecy and praise. The writers understood that it was necessary to possess the gift of prophecy and that they were writing inspired songs for worship. In II Samuel 23:1–2, we read, "Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and His word was in my tongue." As Acts 1:16 and Acts 2:29–31 state, David was a prophet who spoke by the Holy Ghost.

Moses, who wrote Psalm 90, was also a prophet. Others, like Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman, are called seers, but we read in I Samuel 9:9 and elsewhere, “for he that is now called a Prophet was before time called a Seer.” In I Chronicles 25, we read, “Moreover David and the captains of the host separated to the service of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy.” And it describes their sons prophesying, and it goes on, “All of these were the sons of Heman the king’s seer in the words of God.” Again, it goes on a little bit later, “All these were under the hands of their father for song in the house of the LORD, with cymbals, psalteries, and harps, for the service of God, according to the king’s order to Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman. So the number of them, with their brethren that were instructed in the songs of the LORD, even all that were cunning, was two hundred fourscore and eight.” During the Old Testament spiritual reformations under King Hezekiah and Josiah, they returned to God’s inspired songs. II Chronicles 29:30 says, “Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshiped.”

The same principle could be illustrated throughout the Old Testament. God made clear His criteria, which is carried as the standard into the New Testament. The English Puritan, John Owen, wrote, “In every ordinance or worship, we consider God’s appointment of it and submit our souls and consciences unto His authority therein. This is the first thing that faith regards in divine worship. It discerns that God hath commanded, and therein lies His authority as He required it.” The office of prophet has now expired, and the production of inspired songs has ceased. We find no warrant in Scripture for the use of uninspired human compositions in the singing of God’s praise in public worship.

The second point relates to canonical songs. Scripture provides, and we possess, a complete deposit of inspired songs in the Canon of Scripture. Therefore, the Psalms have a unique and authoritative status restricting us to what God made available in the Bible, and God commands us to use them in worship. For example, Psalm 105:2, “Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him.” The divine provision of a collection of inspired songs constitutes a prescription for their use. Their mere existence proves this. The fact that God provided a canonical text for reading, 66 books of the Bible, proves the warrant to use it for such. We have no more warrant to substitute man’s songs for God’s songs and worship than we do to substitute another text for Scripture reading, like the Apocrypha or something. To be clear, God appointed singing in His worship, and He provided the text to be sung. If you walked into a church, and someone handed you a book with the title “Worship Songs” written on the front cover, you would clearly understand its purpose. That is what God did with Psalms. God provides ordinances and prescribes the content: a Bible for reading; the Psalms for singing; the help of the Holy Spirit for praying, not a prayer book; water for baptism; bread and wine for the Lord’s Supper; gifts of preaching for sermons; and so on. We must stick to God’s appointed ordinances.

In Colossians 3:16, we read, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” And in the parallel passage, in Ephesians 5:18–19, we read, “but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” All three Greek words for psalms, hymns, and songs, are used in the titles of the Greek translation of the Psalms. Paul often multiplies words to describe one thing. He’ll speak of signs, wonders, and miracles. In this case, he uses three words for the Psalms. You’ll note the word *spiritual*. The word *spiritual* can qualify the word *song*, or that adjective can qualify all three words, but in every other place in the New Testament, which is 25 times, the Greek word *spiritual* refers to inspired texts. So in Ephesians 5, Paul says, be filled with the Spirit, singing the songs of the Spirit. In Colossians 3, he says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, singing the word of Christ in the Psalms. Christ Himself sings them with and through His people, His word dwelling richly in us. Rather than contradicting the doctrines we have outlined, these two texts, Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5, reinforce the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. The book of Psalms is a complete and permanent book of praise for all ages.

Thirdly, a word about the sufficiency of the Psalms. In light of what we have seen, the Psalms are fully sufficient as a permanent manual of praise. God determines what is sufficient. The New Testament clearly saw no inadequacy in the songs and neither has the church throughout the ages. The early church champion theologian, Athanasius, wrote, “I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms, for they embrace the whole life of man, the affections of his mind and emotions of his soul, to praise and glorify God. He can select a

psalm suited to every occasion and thus will find that they were written for him.” The problem of any perceived inadequacy in the Psalms for New Testament believers lies entirely with us, not the Psalms. Psalm 22:3 says, “But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.” God inhabits the praises derived from His own mouth.

These are Jesus’s songs. He sang the songs He gave. We sing with Him, and we sing about Him, and we sing to Him in the Psalms. In fact, we sing the Psalms more meaningfully as those who live after the coming of Christ. We see and delight in all that they reveal of Christ even more than the Old Testament church because we sing them in light of their New Testament fulfillment. You think of the references to Jerusalem, Zion, and the sacrifices, and so on, pictures of the church and of the sacrifice of Christ. Often, this is evident even in the Psalms themselves. Psalm 141 speaks of incense, but it makes clear that’s a picture of the prayers of God’s people that are rising heavenward. John Calvin was right when he wrote these words, “Now what St. Augustine says is true: that no one is able to sing things worthy of God, unless he has received them from Him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs, no more appropriate to the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouth as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.”

The Huguenots, that is the reformed Christians in France, provide one beautiful example of the influence of the singing of Psalms on God’s people. Those writing at the time tell us that Psalm-singing was one of the greatest influences on the spread of the Reformation of biblical religion throughout France. These believers memorize the Psalms and sung them with intensity all day long in villages and towns throughout the whole country. They could be heard by school children walking on the road, workman plowing the fields, families around their homes, as well as in casual gatherings, and always in public worship. The reformed armies sang them going into war. At a crucial point in battle, their captain would call to his men to raise their voices, and the sung words of Psalm 68 would peel out over the din of cannons as the godly drove themselves like a wedge through their enemies. You can see how Psalm singing permeated their lives. The Word of Christ was dwelling in them richly.

The Psalms should be memorized and sung by believers every day and by the church whenever it gathers. This will enable us to experience the rich blessing described in Psalm 1 of meditating on God’s Law, or Word, day and night and the spiritual fruitfulness that is promised as a result.

In conclusion, I hope that you have a new enthusiasm for this priceless book of the Bible. You must commit yourself to a lifelong, concentrated study and mastery of the Psalms. God has provided us with a permanent book of inspired songs in which we sing of Christ, to Christ, and with Christ. In the next lecture, we will consider the place of Solomon within God’s history of redemption.