

PSALM 51 INTRODUCTION

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. While you're turning there, I want to give an official welcome to those of you who are new to this class. You see, this isn't a brand new class. We actually started meeting all the way back in 2013. At the beginning we called ourselves the "Bible Survey Class" because we read through the entire Bible in two and a half years. Then we started over in Genesis at a slower pace, but we kept slowing down until we were covering just a few verses each week in the book of Judges. And so I decided that it was time to rename our class. Now we call ourselves the "Every Word Sunday School Class." This name is based on what Jesus said when Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread. Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. His response is recorded for us in Mathew 4:4. Here's what he said: "Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

I love that statement, because it emphasizes our need to depend on every word that God has given to us. The Bible is a huge book that has hundreds of thousands of words from God. It's like a treasure chest that's packed full of precious gems. All we need to do is open it and look inside at all the beautiful jewels. I've enjoyed doing that with God's word ever since I was a boy. But that passion jumped to a whole new level when I was in college. That's when I decided to go to seminary, and a few years later I moved here to California to attend The Master's Seminary and get a master of divinity degree. My favorite part of seminary was learning the original languages of Scripture. I got to take several classes in Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek. I loved studying Greek so much that I decided to get a second master's degree and focus on the New Testament.

And so I really enjoy digging into the details of Scripture. I love to figure out how all the words fit together and focus extra attention on individual words. Some words in the Bible don't need much scrutiny, but we can learn a lot from many of them. That's what we've been doing for the past two years as we've slowly worked our way through the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. But now that we've reached the end of the first major section in the letter, I thought it would be good for us to take a short break and spend a little time in the Old Testament. I've had my eye on Psalm 51 for a while, and I'm excited that we now have the chance to study this important psalm.

But before we jump into Psalm 51, I want to take a step back and think about the Book of Psalms as a whole. This book is one of the most well-known parts of Scripture, and yet most Christians don't have much of a clue about its background and how it's put together. So today I want to spend the rest of our time giving you an introduction to the Book of Psalms. Now if you've been in our class for the last few years, you might remember that we studied Psalm 139 before we began 1 Corinthians. And I began that

study by doing the same thing that I'm about to do today. So you'll probably recognize at least some of the material that I'll be covering. But I want to go over this material again for the benefit of those who are newer to the class.

Let's start by talking about the title of this book. The word "Psalms" is a transliteration or letter-for-letter equivalent of the title for this book in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Jesus referred to this title in Luke 20:42 when he gave a quotation from the book. He said, "For David himself says in the Book of Psalms," and then he quoted Psalm 110:1. In Acts 1:20 we can see that the apostle Peter did the same thing. He said, "For it is written in the Book of Psalms," and then he quoted Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. And so the title for this book in our English Bibles is appropriate. But of course this book was originally written in Hebrew, and so we should consider the title used in the Hebrew Bible. It's pronounced *tehilim*, and it just means "praises." It's a good summary of the book since most of the psalms are full of praise to God. The Greek word *psalmos* is very similar in meaning; it means "song of praise." This title stresses the fact that the psalms were sung.

Now let's talk about the location of this book. In our English Bibles it follows the Book of Job, and they're the first two books in the poetry section of the Old Testament. This section comes after the five books of the law and the historical books. And it's followed by a section of prophetic books. But in the Hebrew Bible, Psalms is the first book in a section called the "Writings." It's the last of three sections in the Hebrew Bible; the first two are called the "Law" and the "Prophets." Here's a handout that shows you which books are in each section and what order they're in. I put the text of Luke 24:44 at the bottom of the handout, because it has a quote from Jesus in which he referred to these three sections. But instead of using the word "Writings," he used the word "Psalms" because this book has a preeminent position at the beginning of this section.

Now let's talk about the date of this book. Most books in the Bible were written by one person during a short period of time. But the Book of Psalms is quite different. It's a large collection of individual psalms that were written by many different men over a long period of time. One psalm can be traced all the way back to the time of Moses, and others were apparently written after the Babylonian exile. And so the Book of Psalms was produced over a period of about one thousand years, from the fifteenth century to the fifth century before Christ. This fact makes the Book of Psalms the most distinct book in the Old Testament and even the entire Bible. In one sense this book is a miniature version of the Old Testament in poetical form.

Now let's spend the rest of our time talking about the organization of this book. To me this is what makes the Book of Psalms so fascinating. But it's also a very challenging issue, because at first glance this book seems to be hopelessly disorganized. However, the psalms contain some clues that reveal how they were arranged. And most of these clues are found in the psalm titles. Now many Christians have been taught that the chapter headings in their Bibles are not inspired by God, and that assertion is true—for the most part. But the psalms actually have two sets of titles in most Bibles. One set of titles was added by the translators to summarize the contents of the psalms. We can find similar titles throughout the average Bible. But the other set of titles comes directly from the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

Now many Bible scholars think that these titles were not written by the original authors of the psalms. Instead they claim that these titles were added much later. But the evidence flies in the face of this view. And I can give you two major reasons for rejecting it. First of all, the translators of the Septuagint had a hard time understanding many of the special terms used in the titles. We know this because they often had to transliterate these terms instead of translating them. In other words, they had to give a letter-for-letter equivalent instead of choosing a Greek word with the same meaning as the English word. But if these titles were inserted well after the psalms were written, then there's a big problem here. The time gap would have been pretty short between the time when the titles were supposedly added and the time when the Septuagint began to be translated in the third century B.C. And so in this scenario, the translators shouldn't have had much trouble understanding the meaning of these special terms in the titles.

But there's a second reason for thinking that these psalm titles are inspired, and this one is even stronger. You may have never noticed this before, but the Old Testament actually has several psalms outside the Book of Psalms, and these psalms have titles that are clearly in the text of Scripture. One example is found in 2 Samuel 22, which is almost perfectly identical to Psalm 18. And the first verse of 2 Samuel 22 has a lot of the same wording that we see in the title for Psalm 18. In the Christian Standard Bible the title for Psalm 18 says, "For the choir director. Of the servant of the LORD, David, who spoke the words of this song to the LORD on the day the LORD rescued him from the grasp of all his enemies and from the power of Saul. He said," and then the text of the psalm begins. Now look at 2 Samuel 22:1: "David spoke the words of this song to the LORD on the day the LORD rescued him from the grasp of all his enemies and from the grasp of Saul."

So you can see just how similar the wording is in these two passages. But according to many Bible scholars, 2 Samuel 22:1 is inspired by God, and the title for Psalm 18 is not. But that just doesn't make any sense to me. If the psalm title is inspired in 2 Samuel 22, then why isn't it also inspired in Psalm 18? And if the title for Psalm 18 is inspired, then why aren't the other titles in this book inspired as well? We can find another example of a psalm outside the Book of Psalms in Isaiah 38:9–20. And once again the opening verse has a title that is clearly part of the inspired text. It reveals that this psalm was spoken by King Hezekiah shortly after he recovered from an illness.

But the most helpful example of a psalm outside the Book of Psalms is found in Habakkuk 3. This psalm has a title in the first verse, just like we have in 2 Samuel 22:1 and Isaiah 38:9. Habakkuk 3:1 says, "A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk. According to Shigionoth." But what's interesting about this psalm is that it also has a note at the end that gives instructions about how it's supposed to be performed musically. Look at the last statement in Habakkuk 3:19: "For the choir director: on stringed instruments." Now in the book of Psalms this musical information is usually found at the very beginning of a title. We can see some good examples of this in Psalms 4–6. Look at the beginning of the title for Psalm 4: "For the choir director: with stringed instruments." Now look at how the title for Psalm 5 begins: "For the choir director: with the flutes." Finally, look at the first part of the title for Psalm 6: "For the choir director: with stringed instruments, according to Sheminith."

So here's the big question. Why is this musical information at the end of Habakkuk 3 when it's at begin-

ning of the titles in the Book of Psalms? This is the question that a Bible scholar named James Thirtle grappled with over a hundred years ago. And in the year 1904 he came up with a fascinating answer that has come to be called “Thirtle’s Theory.” What he proposed is that originally many of the psalms in the Book of Psalms had a note at the end, just like we saw in Habakkuk 3. But at some point the divisions between the psalms were lost, and all the information at the end of a psalm was moved to the beginning of the next psalm.

Now at first this theory sounds ridiculous. But it’s actually quite plausible because originally the Bible did not have chapter and verse divisions. And this means that the divisions between the psalms would not have been obvious. Let me give you a handout to illustrate how Thirtle’s Theory works. On the far left side we have the titles for Psalms 3–6 as they’re currently found in our Bibles. But then we can move to the right and see what they would look like without the divisions. Then as we move to the right again, we can see the change that is proposed by Thirtle’s Theory. The musical information that’s currently at the beginning of a title moves to the end of the previous psalm. Then on the far right side we can see what Psalms 3–5 originally looked like if Thirtle’s Theory is correct.

So now we have a match between Habakkuk 3 and Psalms 3–5. In both places the information about the author is at the beginning, and the musical information is at the end. And if we look at some of the other psalms in the Book of Psalms, we can see that Thirtle’s Theory helps us to make better sense of them. Let’s start by considering Psalm 46. The title for this psalm has the phrase “according to *Alamoth*,” which seems to indicate how this psalm was to be sung. The term *alamoth* is actually just a Hebrew word that has been transliterated into English. Old Testament translators sometimes resort to this approach when they’re uncertain about the meaning of a Hebrew word. But in this case the word’s meaning is not too difficult to determine. It clearly refers to one or more young women in a variety of passages. For example, Psalm 68:25 says, “Singers lead the way, with musicians following; among them are young women playing tambourines.” And so in the title for Psalm 46 the Hebrew word *alamoth* probably indicates that the psalm was “to be sung by soprano voices.” That’s the phrase given here by the New Living Translation.

But there’s a bit of a problem here. Psalm 46 makes no mention of women, and it doesn’t seem like the kind of psalm that would be sung by just women. In verse 1 God is called “our refuge and strength.” In verses 2–3 we have phrases like “the earth trembles,” “the mountains topple,” and “water roars.” Verses 7 and 11 both say that “the LORD of Armies is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” This is pretty powerful language, and so it would be more appropriate for the psalm to be sung by men. If you’ve ever seen the Disney animated movie *Frozen*, you can probably remember the song “Frozen Heart” at the very beginning. Can you imagine that song begin sung by women instead of men? That would be weird, wouldn’t it? In the same way, I think it would be weird for Psalm 46 to be sung by sopranos.

But if Thirtle’s Theory is correct, then the Hebrew word *alamoth* actually belongs at the end of Psalm 45 and not the beginning of Psalm 46. And if we take a closer look at Psalm 45, we can see that this psalm provides a much better fit. That’s because there are multiple references to women in Psalm 45. Look at verses 9–15: “Kings’ daughters are among your honored women; the queen, adorned with gold from Ophir, stands at your right hand. Listen, daughter, pay attention and consider: forget your people and

your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty. Bow down to him, for he is your lord. The daughter of Tyre, the wealthy people, will seek your favor with gifts. In her chamber, the royal daughter is all glorious, her clothing embroidered with gold. In colorful garments she is led to the king; after her, the virgins, her companions, are brought to you. They are led in with gladness and rejoicing; they enter the king's palace."

So Thirtle's Theory makes better sense of Psalms 45–46. But we can consider other psalms as well. Let's take a look at Psalm 56. The title for this psalm says that it's supposed to be sung according to the tune "A Silent Dove Far Away." But Psalm 56 doesn't make any reference to a dove. That's not necessarily a problem, but there's not a good connection here either. However, if we look at Psalm 55, we can immediately see a much better connection. Look at what the psalmist said in verse 6: "If only I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and find rest." We have the same Hebrew here that's used in the title for Psalm 56. And so Thirtle's Theory makes much better sense of Psalms 55–56.

But the best proof for this theory is found in the title for Psalm 88. This title has confused Bible scholars for centuries. Look at what it says: "A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah. For the choir director: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite." So this title seems to say that Psalm 88 is "a psalm of the sons of Korah" and that it's also "a Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite." In other words, there's a contradiction here about who wrote this psalm. But Thirtle's theory solves this problem beautifully by moving the first part of this title to the end of Psalm 87. The end result is that the title for Psalm 87 is repeated at the end of the psalm in reverse order. Bible scholars call this a chiasm. Let me show you how this works on a handout. I've even included the Hebrew words, which are read from right to left. The title for Psalm 87 literally says, "Of the sons of Korah. A psalm. A song." And according to Thirtle's Theory, Psalm 87 ends with the words, "A song. A psalm of the sons of Korah." As you can see, there's no contradiction here at all if we follow Thirtle's Theory.

And so I believe we should accept Thirtle's theory about the arrangement of the psalm titles. Unfortunately most Old Testament scholars today have rejected this theory, if they've even heard of it. But it fits the evidence very well. Let me give you an eight-page handout that shows how Thirtle's Theory applies to the whole Book of Psalms. I'm using the Christian Standard Bible, which is my main teaching translation. Whenever I read Scripture, I'm using the Christian Standard Bible unless I tell you otherwise. Now you might think that the changes from Thirtle's Theory are massive, but actually only 72 of the 150 psalms are affected. And usually the only kind of material that moves to the previous psalm is the musical information. The only exceptions are Psalms 46 and 88, which we've already discussed. In other words, the impact of this theory is minimal or nonexistent on most psalms.

So I've talked at length about the titles in the Book of Psalms. I've defended the view that they're inspired by God, and I've shown you how I think they should be arranged. Now let's explore their usefulness for understanding the organization of this book. You'll want to keep that eight-page handout in front of you. Now the musical instructions at the end of the psalms don't really provide any insight. But the information at the beginning of the psalms about authorship and circumstances is much more useful. More specifically, the details about the authors reveal the structure of the book to at least some degree.

If we look at the first 41 psalms, we can see a consistent pattern of authorship. David wrote almost every single one of them! Now four of them are anonymous, but no other author is mentioned besides David. So it seems obvious that these psalms have been collected together because of their common authorship. And if we look at the end of Psalm 41, we can see a doxology there. Verse 13 says, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and amen.” None of the first 40 psalms has the word “amen,” but this psalm ends with two occurrences of this word! And so this formula marks the conclusion of the first book in the Psalms.

Then the authorship shifts to the sons of Korah in Psalms 42–49. Psalms 43 and 46 are anonymous, but all the other psalms here were written by the sons of Korah. Then we can see that Psalm 50 was written by Asaph, and then we have 18 more psalms that were written by David in Psalms 51–71. Only Psalms 66, 67, and 71 are anonymous. But we can also see smaller groups here based on the type of psalm. For example, Psalms 52–55 are called Maskils, while Psalms 56–60 are called Miktams. Then we can see that Solomon was the author of Psalm 72. And if we look at the end of this psalm, we will see another doxology. Look at verses 18–19: “Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does wonders. Blessed be his glorious name forever; the whole earth is filled with his glory. Amen and amen.” Once again we have two occurrences of the word “amen.” Then in verse 20 we can see that “the prayers of David son of Jesse are concluded.” This statement marks the end of the second book of Psalms.

But the arrangement that we’ve seen so far raises some questions. Why are some of David’s psalms in book one while others are in book two? Why doesn’t book one include any psalms attributed to other authors? And why are anonymous psalms found in both books and not just one of them? The answers to these questions can only be discovered when we realize that another factor was involved in the organization of the psalms. We need to consider some of the words that are used to refer to God in these psalms. These terms are actually the primary consideration that influenced the way the first two books of psalms were arranged.

For example, if we look at Psalm 3, we can see that the word “LORD” in all caps is used six times, and the term “God” is used only twice. And if we look at all the other psalms in book one, this pattern holds true. The word “LORD” always outnumbers the word “God.” And when we add up all the occurrences of these two words, the results are quite lopsided. The word “LORD” is used 276 times in these 41 psalms, and the word “God” is used only 67 times. But the situation changes drastically in book two. Now the word “God” dominates. In Psalms 42–72, every psalm uses the word “God” more than the word “LORD.” And the totals in this section of the book are even more extreme. The word “God” is used 214 times, and the word “LORD” is used only 33 times. These two sets of numbers are just too lopsided to be an accident. In God’s providence these psalms were deliberately organized in this way.

But what happened with the rest of the psalms? At first glance Psalm 72:20 seems to indicate that none of them was written by David. But we have 18 more psalms of David that are scattered throughout the rest of the book. Why weren’t these psalms included in either book one or book two? The best answer is that the Book of Psalms as a whole most likely went through several stages during its long history. Psalms 1–72 form the first edition of the book, and it was probably completed around the time of Solomon. But

many psalms would have been written after this time, and other psalms would have been discovered that were written earlier and overlooked.

And so these additional psalms were arranged in three books for a total of five books. These psalms easily could have been organized into fewer books, but most likely this arrangement was meant to create a parallel with the five books of the law. Book three includes Psalms 73–89 and ends with another doxology. Psalm 89:52 says, “Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and amen.” So book three ends with two occurrences of the word “amen,” just like books one and two. Then book four includes Psalms 90–106 and ends with yet another doxology. Psalm 106:48 says, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Hallelujah!” This time the word “amen” only shows up once, but we have the word “hallelujah” to compensate.

Finally, book five includes Psalms 107–150, and I know this is going to shock you, but this book also ends with a doxology. However, this doxology is special, because it actually consists of five whole psalms. Each one of them starts and ends with the word “hallelujah” (Psalms 146:1, 10; 147:1, 20; 148:1, 14; 149:1, 9; 150:1, 6). The word “hallelujah” is just a transliteration of a Hebrew word that means “praise the LORD.” So the focus of Psalms 146–150 is on praising God. And that’s especially true in Psalm 150, because the word “praise” is used 11 times in just six verses. We could say that the Book of Psalms is a bit like a fireworks show. A good fireworks show has a steady stream of fireworks until the grand finale. That’s when lots of fireworks are shot off in a short period of time. And in a similar way, the Book of Psalms has praise to God scattered throughout, but the ending has a concentrated amount of praise.

So this emphatic conclusion is a reminder that when we read this book, we should respond by praising God. Each psalm should lead us to admire and appreciate God because of who he is and what he has done. And what we’re going to see in Psalm 51 is that God deserves our praise because he offers us forgiveness. It’s easy to take that fact for granted and treat it lightly. But this psalm is going to help us understand that we are rebellious sinners who deserve to be punished for all eternity. And yet if we’ve turned away from our sins and trusted in Jesus to save us, God has washed our sins away. We’re no longer guilty in his sight. Instead of being separated from God, we’re part of his family. And someday we will reign with Jesus in his eternal kingdom. Let’s close in prayer and praise God for what he’s done for us.