

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Psalms: An Introduction

Overview: While Job can be read as poetic wisdom fiction (a view held by many biblical scholars), the Psalter is generally not understood the same way, but better thought of as poetic prayers, liturgical poetry, or perhaps poetic journaling. The Psalter gives theological voice to a full range of human experience before God: **Praise**, celebrates divine order, creation, justice; **Protest**, challenge God over suffering, injustice, violence, or abandonment; and **Doubt**, where faith is expressed not as certainty but as honest struggle. This range shows the Psalter is not merely devotional poetry but a complex liturgical and theological collection that legitimizes both **trust and turmoil as faithful speech**.

I. Fun Facts

A. Imprecatory Psalms - are highly controversial, praying for vengeance, suffering, or even violence against enemies. Interpreters have long debated whether they should be read as literal prayers, poetic expressions of raw human anguish, or regulated forms of protest that bring even the darkest emotions into speech before God.

Psalms 58 – “Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime...” (v. 8)

Psalms 69 – “Pour out your indignation upon them... let them be blotted out of the book of the living” (vv. 24–28)

Psalms 109 – “Appoint a wicked man against him... let his children be fatherless” (vv. 6–9)

Psalms 137 – “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (v. 9)

B. The Psalter refers to the collected Book of Psalms, traditionally consisting of 150 psalms arranged as a unified literary and liturgical collection. A “psalm” refers to an individual poem or prayer within the Psalter which is actually divided into **five books** probably to echo the five books of the Torah (each concludes with a doxology except Book V, which ends with the grand crescendo of Psalm 150).

II. The 5 Books Within the Psalter.

A. Book I (Psalms 1–41) The Righteous Individual and Trust in God. Primarily attributed to David, focuses on the individual's relationship with God, frequent prayers for deliverance from enemies, contrasts the righteous and the wicked, and establishes trust as the proper response to life's challenges (notably: Psalm 1, 8, 19, 23).

B. Book II (Psalms 42–72) Longing for God and the Hope of God's Kingdom. Includes the sons of Korah, David, and others, is more communal in tone than Book I, expresses deep spiritual yearning, pain in exile, introduces stronger royal and messianic themes (notably: Psalm 42, 46, 51, 72).

C. Book III (Psalms 73–89) Crisis, Doubt, and the Collapse of Expectations. Dominated by Asaph and the sons of Korah and is the darkest section of the Psalter wrestling with suffering, injustice, and national catastrophe - Questioning the apparent failure of God's promises, national lament, prosperity of the wicked, especially regarding the Davidic covenant (notably: Psalm 73, 74, 77, 88, 89).

D. Book IV (Psalms 90–106) The Lord Reigns. Opens with the prayer of Moses (Psalm 90) and responds to the crisis of Book III shifting hope away from earthly kings toward God's eternal reign and Divine faithfulness despite historical upheaval (notably: Psalm 90, 91, 95, 96, 100, 103, 104).

E. Book V (Psalms 107–150) Thanksgiving, Worship, and Hope Fulfilled. Celebrates restoration after exile, Songs of Ascents (120–134), extensive praise and thanksgiving escalating into a series of Hallelujah Psalms (notably: 146–150).

III. Summary Table

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A. Book Psalms

General Theme

Book I	1–41	Personal trust, righteousness, and God's care for the individual
Book II	42–72	Longing for God, communal faith, and hope in God's anointed king
Book III	73–89	Crisis, lament, injustice, and the apparent failure of God's promises
Book IV	90–106	God's eternal kingship as the answer to human and national instability
Book V	107–150	Restoration, thanksgiving, pilgrimage, wisdom, and universal praise

B. The Narrative Arc across the five books:

David's rise and personal faith (Book I)
The flourishing of the kingdom (Book II)
The kingdom's collapse and exile (Book III)
Renewed confidence in God's kingship (Book IV)
Restoration and exuberant praise (Book V)

IV. The “Moods” of the Psalter

A. Walter Brueggemann offers (“moods of”) the Psalms include **Orientation, Disorientation, and New or Reorientation**, allowing space for gratitude, lament, resistance, and renewed hope.

1. Psalms of Orientation - reflect a world that is ordered, dependable, and meaningful.

Characteristics: Confidence in God, Gratitude, Stability, Harmony, Trust, Joy in creation and Torah, Assurance that justice ultimately prevails. These are prayers of praise and thanksgiving arising from an experience of life's coherence.

2. Psalms of Disorientation - arise when the world no longer makes sense.

Characteristics: Lament, Anger, Fear, Protest, Doubt, Suffering, Injustice, Abandonment, Confusion. Brueggemann emphasizes that these psalms are acts of faith because they address God honestly rather than suppressing pain.

3. Psalms of New Orientation (Reorientation) - come after crisis. They do not restore the old order but express a transformed understanding born through suffering.

Characteristics: Thanksgiving after deliverance, Renewed trust, Wonder, Unexpected grace, New life, Mature faith, Celebration without naïveté. Brueggemann sees these as expressing surprise that life has been given back after loss.

B. Many churches overemphasize a triumphalist reading of the Psalter - promoting orientation and reorientation while neglecting the psalms of disorientation (or spiritual bypassing), thereby failing to give adequate voice to grief, protest, and doubt.

C. Consider Walter Brueggemann's (also Paul Ricoeur) **Pre-Critical, Critical, Post-Critical** theory as it informs his approach to the “Moods” of the Psalter - an ongoing movement between orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

V. Thought Progressions (Absolute / Concrete, Abstract, Mystic receptivity, Spiritual oneness).

Precritical (First Naïveté) – Concrete: Understanding faith through tangible stories, images, rituals, and lived experiences, accepting them as they are.

Critical – Abstract: Stepping back to analyze, question, and interpret beliefs using reason and critical reflection.

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Postcritical (Second Naïveté) – Mystic receptivity and Spiritual oneness: Returning to faith with a renewed openness to mystery and a deeper sense of connection, where symbols and stories are embraced as profoundly meaningful rather than merely literal.

VI. James Fowler's Stages of Faith

Stage 0: Primal or Undifferentiated Faith (Infancy) Birth to age two. Children build a foundation of trust, hope, and love through consistent interaction with caregivers.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (Early Childhood) Ages three to seven. Thinking is uninhibited by logic. Children rely heavily on imagination, symbols, and stories, largely absorbing the impressions of adults around them.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (School Age) Ages seven to twelve. The mind becomes more concrete and logical. Individuals take religious stories, metaphors, and moral rules literally, expecting the universe to be strictly fair and reciprocal.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence to Adulthood) Ages twelve and up. Individuals synthesize their values into a cohesive belief system to fit into social circles, but they often conform to the expectations of authority figures or peers without critically examining the doctrines themselves.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (Young Adulthood) Mid-twenties to late thirties. This stage involves an intentional shifting away from externally imposed values. Individuals take personal responsibility for their own beliefs and critically evaluate their foundational worldviews.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (Mid-Adulthood and Beyond)

Often occurring during midlife. Individuals develop an openness to paradox and mystery. They accept that truth is complex, multi-faceted, and cannot be perfectly encapsulated by a single tradition, religion, or rigid belief.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (Rare/Enlightenment)

A highly uncommon phase in later adulthood. Individuals transcend specific religious or tribal boundaries and develop an all-encompassing dedication to justice, radical compassion, and universal love for all humanity.

VII. Brueggemann, Ricouer and Fowler Synthesized as an approach to the Psalter

Reading the Psalter is a lifelong journey of spiritual formation that moves readers through stages of faith and interpretation rather than a single, fixed understanding. Beginning with concrete engagement, the psalms are received through their vivid images, prayers, and lived experiences in a spirit of trust, reflecting Paul Ricœur's precritical (first naïveté) stage and James Fowler's early stages of faith. As readers mature, they enter abstract reflection, critically examining the Psalms' theological tensions, ultimately inviting a postcritical return marked by mystic receptivity where its poetry and symbols become avenues for encountering God with openness. Like Walter Brueggemann's movement through orientation, disorientation, and new orientation, this developmental process is cyclical rather than linear, as readers continually revisit the Psalms from new life experiences, allowing them to shape an ever-deepening faith.

VIII. The Tensions of July 4th in conversation with the Psalter

Reading the Psalms in their full diversity—praise, trust, lament, and protest—forces the reader to hold together both celebration and moral dissonance, much like the tension exposed in American independence when viewed through Frederick Douglass's question of how a nation could celebrate freedom from Britain while enslaving Africans. On a day like July 4th, psalms of praise and thanksgiving resonate with themes of liberation and divine deliverance, yet psalms of lament and protest refuse to let celebration become simplistic, insisting that freedom is incomplete when injustice persists. In this

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way, the Psalter trains readers to rejoice in freedom/deliverance while also crying out against oppression, and to let both voices stand in tension before God.

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