



Foreword

One of the first – and still perhaps the best – summaries of the Bible in just a few messages that I have heard was given by Alec Motyer about twenty-five years ago. I was a student, speaking to students at the same conference. But when I saw Motyer was speaking on this topic, I could not resist attending all his lectures. And the view of God’s Word he gave me has been a lasting gift ever since.

In your hand you have three gifts. First, one of our finest scholars has used his knowledge and long experience as a linguist and a Christian to give us a fresh translation of all 150 Psalms. This in and of itself is a gift of no small value. The translation is fresh in a number of ways – the use of Yah and Yahweh, the word choice, even some modern idioms. But these translations have not been done – as they so often are – by those who are heavy in thinking of communications and light in understanding the text. Alec Motyer has tutored generations of pastors – me among them – in our understanding of God’s Word. His Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament gives a fullness and a resonance to his reading of the Psalms which seems like the way our Lord taught us to read the Psalms. And the reading is reflected even in the translation itself. If you want to know more about the way he has approached translating the Psalms, take a moment and read the introduction. Embedded within the translation, you’ll also find outlines which are suggestive for Bible study leaders and preachers in communicating the information.

Another gift that Dr Motyer has given us is in the notes. And let me be clear – in preparing to write this foreword – I read every word in the book, and the notes are themselves of great help to the Christian who would understand and appreciate the Psalms. Clear statements that would seem like hyperbole from others come with simple weight from Motyer’s pen. For example, ‘Psalm 51 is the Old Testament’s central text on repentance.’ In his notes he educates the reader on what was and was not done in Hebrew poetry. What causes some commentators to stumble in Psalm 105, he presents as an intentional emphasis by the author on our obedience. The ‘Pause for Thought’ about Hezekiah’s tunnel on Psalms 123–125 is piercing! Plenty more perspective-giving notes await the reader.

In some of them, apparent problems are solved. In others, I’ve been shown better ways to conceive what the Psalmist is saying, sometimes suggesting new avenues for understanding the whole Psalm, and often making Christ clearer in the Psalm. Again and again he reads the

Psalms sensitively and persuasively as being centered on Jesus Christ. All together, even in the notes we have a rare combination of textual, grammatical knowledge of the Psalms with wide knowledge of the whole sweep of Scripture – Old and New, together with systematic theology, Christian experience, all with the warmth of a brother in Christ who knows himself to be more student than teacher, to have received more than he could ever give.

The ‘Pause for Thoughts’ devotions are a final gift that our author leaves us with. They act as a commentary for the reader who feels intimidated by the specific notes in the margins of the text. They summarize the main contribution the preceding Psalms make. And yet they are more than summary. They help to give us perspective on the significance or importance of what we’ve read, often in such a way that at least I have wanted to go back and re-read the preceding Psalm. Look at his thoughts on Psalm 37 for an example of this. Or those about hope in Psalms 61–63. Reflecting on Psalm 69, Motyer writes ‘Our only escape from the Son of Man, our Judge, is to flee to the Son of Man, our Saviour.’ His summary of the Psalms’ teaching on the messianic king in his ‘Pause for Thought’ after Psalm 72 is a tiny, splendid, encouraging *tour-de-force!* Pithy and learned expressions abound. ‘To abandon prayer is to embrace atheism’ (p. 246).

In these concluding ‘Pauses’, Motyer’s long Christian experience, his knowledge of the New Testament, as well as the Old, act together with the Psalm being considered to serve us. These thoughts are expository without being dry, devotional without being forced. His thoughts flow from an intelligent and careful reading of the Psalms immediately before him. And as we get to look over his shoulder, we learn to read the Psalms better for ourselves, and for those we may be called to teach.

Throughout this work, Motyer’s writing gives us a delicious combination – richly full, concisely put. For generations now, Alec Motyer has been one of the best at combining the smallest of details with the grand sweep of the biblical narrative, and in ways which are not wrongly original or novel, but which are faithful and obvious in the text once we’ve noticed them. Here a master of systematic and biblical theology shows us the artificial nature of that very distinction. And he does it while taking us through the church’s hymn-book, the Psalms, and all in seventy-three days! Read and profit.

MARK DEVER

Senior Pastor,
Capitol Hill Baptist Church and President,
9Marks.org,
Washington, DC



Introduction

Between You and Me: A Word of Explanation

The aim of this book is not to try to tell you what the Psalms mean, but to try to offer you a few helps towards discovering for yourself what they mean. Please use all the bits and bobs in this book to that end. I suppose the great stories in the Old Testament loomed largest in our Sunday School days (at least if you are of my age-group), but over the centuries – and I mean centuries – it is the psalms which have spoken loudest to the Christian church. Even in comparatively recent times they contributed hugely to our Sunday worship, much, much more than they are allowed to do today. But you and I can at least bring the Psalms and all their treasures back into our personal lives. Please, by means of this book, let me play a small part in your repossession of such wonderful richness.

1. The translation. It is on the whole not very helpful to play around with words like ‘literal’ and ‘paraphrase’. What I have set out to do in offering my own translation of Psalms is to bring you as near as I can to the Hebrew of the original. Very often this extends to following the word order of the Hebrew – even where it is awkward in English – because word-order reflects emphasis.
2. Short lines. In part, the short lines in which the translation is set out match the way Hebrew poetry works, but I have used a short line presentation for a different reason – to try to encourage slower reading – in the hope of helping you to stop over individual thoughts, and to give them due weight!
3. I am dreadfully afraid in case my enthusiasm for analysis may prove a nuisance and hindrance to you. I was bitten by this delightful bug at a very early age, and, to me, analysis is the surest way into fruitful Bible study. But if you should find it a burden, just get on with reading. Hopefully, my occasional notes will open a door now and again for you.
4. If you find any day’s allocation more than is manageable, why not spread it over two or more days?



5. Hebrew is an ‘and’ language. It does not on the whole go in for subordinate clauses, preferring to add a new clause introduced by the conjunction. This means that, in effect, the conjunction has a wide variety of significance. But I have tended simply to use ‘and’, leaving it to the reader’s good sense (which is what the Hebrew is doing anyway!) to decide whether it means ‘but’ – or whatever.

6. Nouns and adjectives. Even where Hebrew has an adjective available (‘holy’ is a case in point) it often prefers to express the adjectival idea by means of the related noun – ‘a mountain of holiness’ instead of ‘a holy mountain’. Since I am sure that this is a more emphatic way of expressing the same idea – and has been deliberately used in its context – I have preserved the genitive use of the noun rather than allowing it so relapse into being an adjective.

7. The divine Name ‘Yahweh’ will at first sound strange in your ears, being used to the established (but mistaken) English convention of representing the name as ‘the LORD’. We who are of an older generation will remember the days when calling someone by their Christian name was a privilege granted, not to be presumed upon. It meant something to us when a senior friend said, ‘Please call me by my Christian name’; the relationship had ripened into a new intimacy and privilege. So it was in Genesis 4:26 when people began to call their God by his personal name; so it was, even more, when the significance of that Name was revealed to Moses (Exod. 3:15). A totally false sense of reverence later said ‘The Name is too holy for us to use,’ and the custom was introduced of representing it as ‘the LORD’. No, no. He has granted us the privilege, and we should learn (belatedly) to live in the benefit of it. Hebrew has two main nouns for ‘God’. There is the plural *elohim*, God in the fullness of the divine attributes – for simplicity I translate this as ‘God’ – and the singular *el*, which I translate as ‘transcendent God’. But there is only one ‘Name’. ‘God’ is *what* he is; Yahweh is *who* he is.



I truly hope you will enjoy my book; I know you will enjoy the Psalms.

Day I Read Psalms I–2

Psalm 1.

The Great Decision and its Fruits

A.1. Earthly distinctiveness: divine favour

1. Blessed¹ is the man
who has determined² not to walk
according to³ the advice of wicked people,
nor, according to the way of sinners,⁴
to take his stand,
nor in the seat of cynics⁵ to sit.

B.1. Continuance: delight in God's law

2. To the contrary,⁶
in Yahweh's teaching⁷ is his pleasure,⁸
and in his teaching he meditates by day and night.

C.1. Security: the flourishing tree

3. Consequently,
he is like a tree,
transplanted⁹ beside channels of water,
which yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither –
and whatever he does, he prospers.¹⁰

C.2. Insecurity: the wind-blown chaff

4. Not so the wicked ones!
To the contrary¹¹ –
like chaff which the wind drives about!

- 1 Hebrew *ashrey* has three possible renderings according to context: 'under God's blessing' (as here); 'happy' in what one is doing or how one is placed (e.g. 1 Kings 10:8), 'doing what is morally justified/right, what is deserved' (e.g. Psalm 137: 8, 9).
- 2 The three verbs 'walk ... stand ... sit' are perfect tense, here perfects of fixed attitude or decision, expressing three aspects of life (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:17) – 'walk' is habitual 'life-style'; 'stand', to 'stand up and be counted'/'take a stand for'; 'sit', to be associated with such and such a company.
- 3 'According to' is, lit. 'in'; here 'in terms of'.
- 4 Both 'wicked' and 'sinner' are broad, general words. If we are to be more specific, 'wicked' possibly comes from a verb meaning 'to be loose' or 'lax'; 'sinners' means those who 'miss the target'. Compare the verb in its 'secular' use, Judges 20:16.
- 5 *letsiyim*, those who have settled into a dismissive attitude of scoffing or 'rubbishing' all that is spiritual or 'serious'.
- 6 A very strong expression of an alternative: 'But indeed'.
- 7 'Teaching', *torah*, usually translated 'law'. 'Teaching' may be expressed as legislation, but its primary force is always 'instruction', as, e.g. Proverbs 4:1, what a careful father imparts to loved children.
- 8 Note the emphasis – not on outward obedience (as v. 1) – but on inward realities: 'pleasure', the delight of the will; 'meditates', directing and feeding the mind. Compare Joshua 1:8. Godliness starts on the inside.

B.2. No continuance: divine judgment

5. Therefore, the wicked ones will not rise up¹² in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous¹³ ones,

A.2. Eternal distinction and its explanation

6. because Yahweh knows¹⁴ the way¹⁵ of righteous ones,
and the way of the wicked ones will perish.¹⁶

Psalm 2. The Anointed King of Kings

A.1. Kings opposing

1. Why are the nations in turmoil,¹⁷
and states¹⁸ keep pondering empty schemes?
2. The kings of the earth take up their stations,
and the potentates¹⁹ sit in conclave
against Yahweh and against his anointed one:
3. 'Let us tear apart their restraints,
and throw off from us their bondage.'

B.1. The LORD speaks

4. He who sits enthroned²⁰ in heaven²¹ laughs!²²
The Sovereign One²³ mocks them!
5. Then²⁴ he will speak to them in his exasperation,²⁵
and in his rage he will terrify them:
6. 'For my part,²⁶
I have installed my king
On Zion, the hill of my holiness.'²⁷

B.2. The Son speaks

7. 'I want to recount²⁸ Yahweh's statute.'²⁹
He said to me:

9 Verb *shathal*, to transplant. Psalm 92:13–14 illustrates the meaning here: not the tree's natural position, not where it once was, but in a new place, chosen for fruitfulness; in Ps. 92, the position we have by grace.

10 Expressing a position of faith. It is, and always will be, well with the righteous (those right with God), e.g. Isaiah 3:10.

11 As in v. 2.

12 The verb 'to rise up' is used in the sense 'to have standing in law/ to maintain one's position when brought to trial'.

13 'Righteous', i.e. right with God, so also v. 6.

14 'To know' often has the meaning (as here) 'to be intimately aware of/ to maintain a caring relationship with'. Compare Exodus 2:25. The emphasis in the Hebrew would justify a rendering 'How well Yahweh knows!'

15 On 'way' see v. 1.

16 i.e. their characteristic habits of life will lead to perishing. Note how this psalm's first word is 'blessed' and its last word is 'perish' – the choice (and the warning) with which the Psalms begin.

17 Perfect and Imperfect tenses alternate: 'in turmoil' and 'sit' are perfect, giving the sense of fixed determination; 'pondering' and 'take up' are imperfects, expressing repeated actions, customary behaviour.

18 *le'umiym*, usually translated 'peoples'. The root verb is not used in the Bible, but cognate languages suggest 'to bring together/ make common cause'. 'States' is a reasonable rendering, in order to give the word a distinctive meaning.



- “You are my son;³⁰
I have myself begotten you today.
8. Ask from me,
and I will surely give nations as your inheritance,
and, as your holding, the very limits of the earth.
9. You will shepherd³¹ them with an iron sceptre;
like a potter’s vessel you will shatter them.”

A.2. Kings submitting

10. Now then, kings, act prudently.
Accept correction, judges³² of the earth.
11. Serve Yahweh with fear,
and exult with trembling.³³
12. Kiss the son, lest he be exasperated,³⁴
and you perish for³⁵ your way
when his anger burns even a little.
Blessed³⁶ are all who seek refuge in him!

- 19 *rozenim*, compare Judges 5:3; Isaiah 40:23. The verb is said to mean ‘to be weighty, judicious’. The Scots/N. Irish coinage ‘high-heid-yins’ (‘high-head-ones’), with its suggestion of position and pomposity, catches the thought exactly.
- 20 The verb ‘to sit’ frequently has the contextual meaning, as here, ‘to sit enthroned’; e.g. Psalm 123:1 (NKJV ‘to dwell’).
- 21 ‘He who sits’ and ‘the Sovereign’ are given the emphatic position in their sentences, thus underlining the reigning reality and power of Yahweh.
- 22 ‘Laughs’ and ‘mocks’ are imperfects, either expressing ‘goes on laughing’ or, as a tense of emphasis, ‘just laughs’. Hence the exclamation marks.
- 23 *Adonai*, which means ‘lord’ or ‘master’, always of Yahweh in his sovereignty.
- 24 The temporal ‘then’, at that point in time; when his laughter has run its course, and the time of forbearance is over.

- 25 *hebanas*, part of a wide vocabulary for ‘anger’. Here ‘*aph*, a word also meaning ‘nose’ is the snort of anger.
- 26 Emphatic subject, ‘I’.
- 27 Or ‘my holy hill’. Hebrew can express an adjective by using the attached noun, but where an adjective exists, as in this case, ‘holy’, the noun-formation must surely be a technique of emphasis: the hill where my holiness is present and is its most significant feature.
- 28 The verb is cohortative in form, expressing (here) strong personal determination
- 29 ‘Statute’, from the verb ‘to engrave’; something carved in the rock for permanency.
- 30 Compare 2 Samuel 7:14, the promise to the Davidic king. Psalm 2 may have been a ‘coronation psalm’, with this assertion of sonship (in an adoption sense) at its heart. It is, of course, literally true of Jesus: Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; compare John 1:18; and elsewhere.
- 31 The verb ‘to shepherd’ deprives the picture of an ‘iron sceptre’ of any thought of oppression or cruelty. Rather it implies firmness and strength. To his enemies, of course, it is different (compare Mark 1:24): the twinned images of ‘iron sceptre’ and ‘shattered pot’ contrast absolute power with total helplessness.
- 32 Not to be restricted to those who conduct courts of law. Nor, throughout the Old Testament, is ‘judgment’ to be equated with ‘passing judgment/condemning’. e.g. Psalm 98:7–9 can depict the earth rejoicing when Yahweh comes to ‘judge’, because he comes to ‘make authoritative decisions’ which will ‘put things to rights’. ‘Judges’, here, are the world’s decision-makers.

Pause for Thought

Have you noticed that Psalm 2 ends where Psalm 1 begins, with blessing pronounced on the individual described in 1:1, and on all those described in 2:12? This has the effect of bracketing the two psalms together. They appear very different but, guided by this bracketing, we find them complementary. Psalm 1:1 describes the blessed way of life. This individual lives by distinctive directives ('advice'), distinctive principles ('takes his stand') and distinctive settled convictions ('sit'). Psalm 2:12 focuses on a special relationship, in this case with the anointed One, the Lord's Son: personal devotion ('kiss', compare, 1 Kings 19:18), and trustful reliance ('seek refuge'). Secondly, each psalm speaks in its own way of what Psalm 1:3 calls the transplanted life. Neither the individual of Psalm 1 nor the 'all' of Psalm 2:12 are where they once were; there has been a great change, the acquisition of a new position. In Psalm 1, new life comes from life-giving waters; in Psalm 2, an erstwhile 'king' has submitted to the LORD's King who reigns on Zion. Psalm 87 describes this as acquiring new citizenship (compare Philippians 3:20), and therefore new possibilities, resources and privileges. Thirdly, in each case, the newness of position and life has come about through heeding the Word of God. The LORD's Word came to the 'kings of the earth' (2:2) that their rebellion was hopeless because his King was already in office on Zion (2:6) – a word confirmed by the testimony of the Son that, by the Father's decree, it was his right to possess and rule the earth to its uttermost boundaries (2:8–9). In Psalm 1:2–3 the waters that refresh and renew the transplanted tree are consequent on delighting in and pondering the Lord's teaching. The heart of Psalm 2 is fulfilled in the reign of Jesus, the LORD's King, in the present (Hebrews 12:22–24) and the eternal Zion (Revelation 22:10, 22–27; 22:1); the heart of Psalm 1 is fulfilled in the Lord's provision of the completed, inspired Scripture (2 Timothy 3:10–17); the heart of the spiritual life, Psalms teaches, lies in our devotion (2:12a) and constant resorting (2:12b) to the Lord Jesus, and in our assiduous attention to the Word of God (1:2).

33 'Fear ... trembling': the joy of salvation is ever aware of personal lack of merit, the greatness of divine mercy and the unabated holiness of God. Ponder 'it may be' (niv, 'perhaps') in Zephaniah 2:3; compare Exodus 20:20.

34 See above v. 5.

35 The Hebrew has no preposition governing 'way'. It could be 'on your way': as you go blithely on (compare Matthew 5:25). 'For your way' means 'in retribution for your unchanged life-style'.

36 See Psalm 1:1.

Day 2 Read Psalms 3–7

Psalm 3. Facing a New Day

A song¹ of David's when he fled from his son, Absalom.²

A.1. Problem

1. Yahweh, how³ many my adversaries are!
How many, those who are rising against me!
2. How many are saying to my soul,⁴
'There is no salvation for him in God!' (*Selah*)⁵

B.1. Affirmation

3. And you,⁶ Yahweh, are a shield around me,
my glory,⁷
and the One who lifts up my head!

C. Assurance

4. With my voice⁸ to Yahweh I kept crying,
and he did answer me,
from Zion, the hill of his holiness.⁹ (*Selah*)
5. As for me,
I¹⁰ lay down and slept;¹¹
I woke up,
For it is Yahweh who keeps supporting me.¹²
6. I am not afraid of myriads of people
who, all around, have taken their stand against me.

B.2. Prayer

7. Rise, Yahweh!¹³
Save me, my God!

- 1 *mizmor*, from the verb *zamar*, 'to make music', hence 'a musical composition', a 'song'. In flight for his life David still has a song in his heart! The psalm instructs us how to meet the troubled day. These 'titles' have, to our knowledge, always been an integral part of the text of the psalms, counting as verse 1 when verses were numbered. They should be treated as serious introductions to their psalms.
- 2 See 2 Samuel 15–17.
- 3 The exclamatory 'how' occurs only once but, in the manner of Hebrew verse, 'governs' the next two lines as well. The enmity is real and strong (line 1), active (line 2), triumphalist and confident (line 3).
- 4 'Soul', *nepheš*, is here an emphatic way of expressing 'me', the essential person, the person considered at the centre of his being and distinctiveness.
- 5 Found over seventy times in Psalms, but without clear meaning today. It seems to have been a direction how the psalm was to be used in worship.
- 6 Emphatic 'you', a deliberate turning to Yahweh, and concentration on him in the face of the enemy, step one in dealing with the troubled day.
- 7 David has at this moment lost all earthly 'glory' (compare 2 Samuel 15:30). His real glory remains: the surrounding presence of Yahweh.
- 8 'With my voice' describes spelling out our prayer in our own words, coming personally to Yahweh and telling him the whole tale as we know it.

A.2. Solution

For you will surely strike all my enemies on the cheek;
the teeth of the wicked you will surely break!¹⁴

8. To Yahweh belongs salvation!
Upon your people¹⁵ your blessing! (*Selah*)

Psalm 4. Facing Another Night¹⁶

Belonging to the worship-leader¹⁷; set for strings;¹⁸ a
song¹⁹ of David's.

A.1. Assurance in praying to God

1. When I call out, answer me,
God of my righteousness.²⁰
In adversity, you will surely have compassion²¹ on me.
Grant me your grace,²² and hear my prayer.

B.1. Detractors, undermining self-confidence

2. Sons of man,
how long is my glory to become ignominy?
How long will you love worthlessness,
seek²³ after deception? (*Selah*)

C. The sevenfold spirituality²⁴

3. Know, then, that Yahweh has separated off for himself
the beloved one
(Yahweh will hear when I call out to him!).
4. Be agitated,
and stop sinning.
Speak in your heart in your bed,

9 See 2:6. Absalom has seized Mt Zion,
but Yahweh has not abdicated from the
'real' Zion.

10 Emphatic 'I'. Imagine me, placed as I
am, getting a good night's sleep!

11 Cohortative, here used as a form of
emphasis: 'and how well I slept!'

12 The Lord my pillow! Note the
emphasis on 'Yahweh'.

13 Compare Numbers 10:35. Is David
seeing his tiny, fleeing company as
the onward marching people of God
– therefore able to repeat this ancient
marching cry?

14 Perfects of future certainty. 'Strike
the cheek' signifies rebuke; 'break the
teeth' signifies disarming, rendering
harmless (as in our expressing 'a
toothless tiger').

15 Those rallying to David; all for whom
he feels royal responsibility. His prayer
runs beyond personal concern.

16 Another Psalm, probably, during the
flight from Absalom. David is facing a
second night under the stars! Allowing
Absalom's forces another twenty-four
hours to pursue and attack; therefore
increased threat!

17 Lit. 'To the eminent one'. Applied to
fifty-four psalms. Translated 'overseers'
in 2 Chronicles 34:13. 1 Chronicles
6:31 records that David appointed
worship-leaders. Presumably, at some
stage before the psalms were brought
into the present full collection, some
'worship-leader' assembled, from
various sources, an earlier collection
under his auspices.

18 *neginoth*, from the verb *nagan*, to
strike, usually conjectured as striking a
stringed instrument.

19 See Psalm 3 (heading).