

*how to study*

# THE BIBLE

— *psalms* —



# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE: PSALMS

## DESERT SPRINGS CHURCH

Charles Simeon (1759-1836), an English evangelical clergyman, is known in his teachings and writings for the principle that “the point of the text should be the point of the sermon.” By “text,” of course, he meant the Bible. We could equally say that, for all Christians, the point of the text should be the point of discipleship, Christian growth, and what leads to application. The point of the text should also be what we use to encourage, warn, build up, and counsel others.

If the point of the text is the starting place for everything, then finding out the point of the text is of first importance. This is not subjective, with each person determining the text’s meaning in a different manner. Rather there are rules and principles to follow. There are tools and techniques to help us in following the principles. That’s what this seminar is all about: the point of the text, and how to get there.

Here’s one more quote from Charles Simeon:

“My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”

# LESSON 1

## BASICS OF HEBREW POETRY AND PSALM 1

Ryan Kelly

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Why a seminar on the Psalms?

### 1.2 BASICS OF HEBREW POETRY

#### **1.21 Kinds of Psalms**

Praise (e.g., Pss 100, 103-105)

Thanksgiving (e.g., Pss 18, 34, 107)

Confidence/Trust (e.g., Pss 11, 23, 46)

Historical (e.g., Pss 78, 105-106)

Lament (e.g., Pss 3-5)

Imprecatory (e.g., Pss 35, 69, 88)

Kingship/Royal (e.g., Pss 2, 72, 110)

Wisdom (e.g., Pss 19, 112, 127)

#### **1.22 Parts of Hebrew Poetry**

Line

Strophe

Stanza

### 1.23 Elements of Hebrew Poetry

*Repetition* (of words, phrases, or concepts)

*Word Pictures*

Symbolism (e.g., Ps 3:7)

Metaphor (e.g., Ps 23:1)

Simile (e.g., Ps 131:2)

Synecdoche (e.g., God's name, right hand, or side)

*Parallelism*

Synonymous Parallelism Def:

Example: Ps 6:9

Antithetical Parallelism Def:

Example: Ps 18:27

Synthetic Parallelism Def:

Example: Ps 6:4

Climactic Parallelism Def:

Example: Ps 29:1

Emblematic Parallelism Def:

Example: Ps 42:1

Simplifying Parallelism "Two lines with some kind of difference or movement"

What's this doing? And what's the significance?

*Inclusio* - e.g., Ps 122:1, 8 – “house of the Lord”

Ps 8:1, 9 – “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth”

*Chiasm* - e.g., Ps 110

A	A
B	B
B'	C
A'	B'
	A'

## 1.24 Historical and Literary Context

Author (e.g., 75 are by David)

Historical Setting (e.g., Pss 3, 51, 63)

Location in the Psalms (e.g., Psalms of Ascents)

## 1.25 Movement (or Flow) of a Psalm

Is there a change in:

- kind?
- subject?
- object?
- topic?
- voice?
- setting?
- tense?
- tone?
- point of view?

### 1.3 PUTTING IT TO WORK ON PSALM 1

- 1** Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
    nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
- 2** but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.
- 3** He is like a tree  
    planted by streams of water  
    that yields its fruit in its season,  
    and its leaf does not wither.  
    In all that he does, he prospers.
- 4** The wicked are not so,  
    but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5** Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- 6** for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked will perish.

Kind of Psalm

Subjects

Word Pictures

Parts of the Psalm

Structure

Applications

## LESSON 2

# COLLECTIONS IN THE PSALTER AND PSALM 90

Ronald Giese

### 2.1 OVERVIEW OF 5 BOOKS OF PSALTER

We'll view The Bible Project: Psalms

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8>

At 4:55 in the video, it is noted that Book 3 talks about the exile in Babylon (Israel's rebellion, destruction of Jerusalem, downfall of line of David, and exile). The poet calls out to God to never forget His promise to David.

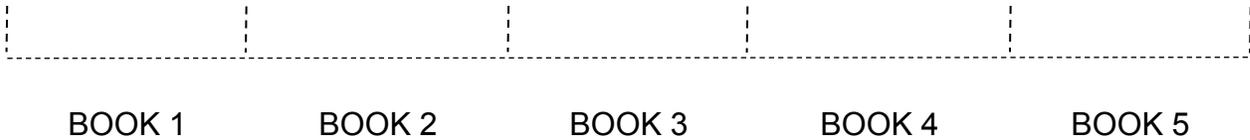
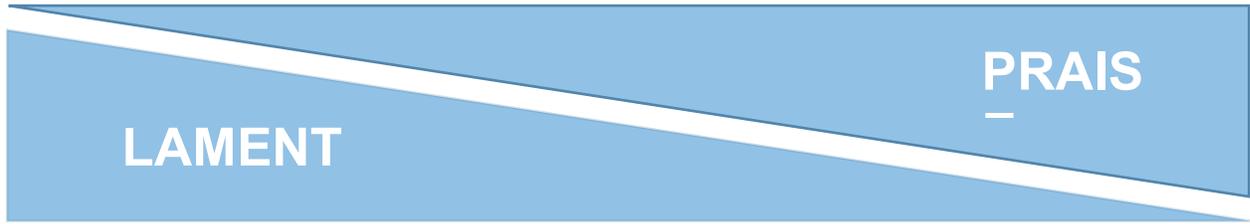
At 5:20 it is noted that Book 4 is written to *respond* to this crisis of exile.

At 5:50, Book 5 opens with psalms that affirm that God hears the cries of His people, and will one day send His future king to defeat evil and bring about God's kingdom. Key psalms in this last book give hope for the future messianic kingdom.

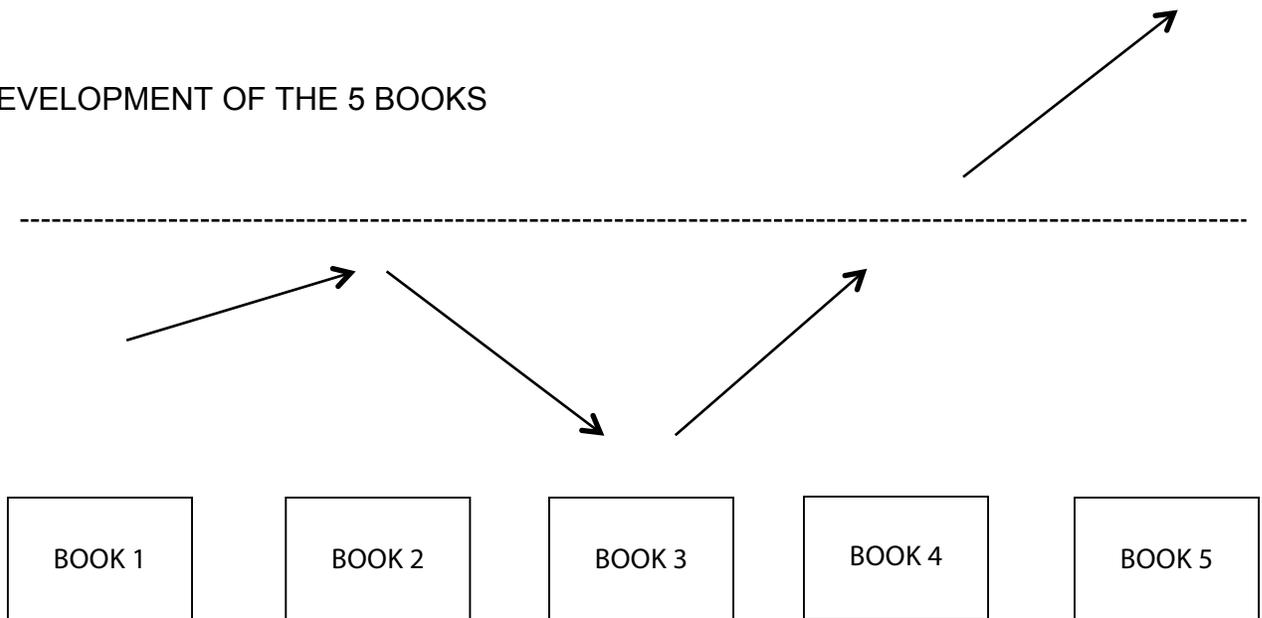
The video also makes a great point that the Psalter begins with mostly lament psalms (with some praise psalms mixed in), but ends with mostly praise (starting with some lament mixed in, but then no lament at all by the end of Book 5).

Or as the Bible Project says, "biblical faith is forward looking" (8:40-45 in the video).

<b>BOOK</b>	<b>PSALMS</b>	<b>DOXOLOGY</b>	<b>NEW AUTHOR</b>
1	Pss 1-41	Ps 41:9-12 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.	David
2	Pss 42-72	Ps 72:18-20 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders. And blessed be His glorious name forever; And may the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen.  The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.	sons of Korah
3	Pss 73-89	Ps 89:52 Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.	Asaph
4	Pss 90-106	Ps 106:48 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, "Amen." Praise the LORD.	Moses
5	Pss 107-150	Ps 150:1-6 (all) Praise the LORD ... Praise the LORD ...	The LORD Himself



DEVELOPMENT OF THE 5 BOOKS



Confrontation with enemies. David's life threatened. Before David is king. The "nations" are enemies who are out to kill God's messiah, and they will be punished.

David is king. But kingship is still threatened (ups and downs). Even though still David's deadly enemies, the "nations" will join Israel in worship.

Israel in exile, temple and kingship destroyed. Some key verses are 79:1 and 83:1-4. Ends with Ps 89, a question of "How long?" but a reassurance of God's faithfulness.

As in the days of Moses (Ps 90), God Himself is the only King that Israel needs. The wicked still reign, but God will not be angry forever (94:14; 103:9).

As with the return to Jerusalem (Songs of Ascent), in Jerusalem the Lord surrounds His people forever (125:2).

## 2.2 EXPOSITION OF PSALM 90

### 2.21 Ps 90 starts Book 4. Who is the new author introduced?

Up to this point in the book of Psalms the focus has been on David. Now there is a shift to a different author, who was not from the time of the kings at all. This was from a time when God Himself was king.

Ps 89 ended with “How long, O LORD?” (v. 46) and “LORD where is your steadfast love of old?” (v. 49).

### 2.22 Ps 90 is part of a mini-collection

Ps 90:1 has the term “dwelling place,” used of God. Where does this occur in Ps 91? (this term in Hebrew only occurs 5x in the Psalms, and only in these two places in Books 4-5).

Ps 90:14 “morning” and “steadfast love.” Where in Ps 92?

Ps 90:15 God “making us glad.” Where in Ps 92?

Ps 90: 17 “work of our hands.” Where is something similar in Ps 92?

### 2.23 Ps 92, ending the mini-collection, is the only Psalm dedicated to the Sabbath.

Sabbath is symbolic of teaching and worship (only symbolic of “rest” in the sense of a freedom from work, work that is a result of the curse on mankind). On Sabbath we don’t distance ourselves from God (“take a nap” or “do nothing”) we celebrate, sometimes through quiet meditation and sometime through exultant singing, God’s saving acts in both creation and salvation.

The only Psalm that starts with the word “good” (very first word in Hebrew).

“Psalm 92 is a prayer of thanksgiving that focuses on God’s vanquishing of enemies and on God’s provision of a safe place for God’s people to worship” and the psalm “ends with a description of life without war lived in God’s care.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 702.

“... instead of questioning the absence of God’s love and faithfulness, these attributes are to be lifted up in thanksgiving and song.”<sup>2</sup>

2.24 Ps 93 starts a new mini-collection

These are called “Enthronement Psalms,” which are about God’s kingship and his rule (“judging”) of all the earth.

2.25 Ps 90 is part of a mini-collection

Ps 90 is lament and request

Ps 91 responds with promise of deliverance

Ps 92 gives thanks for the Lord’s intervention.

Part of the idea here is to not read one without the others. We don’t err when we do that. But we also don’t get a full and complete picture.

---

<sup>2</sup> deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 702

## 2.3 MINI-COLLECTIONS

We know that the Psalter is organized into five books. And that there is order to the give, and each book has its own themes and purpose.

However, within each of the books, there are smaller collections. Sometime just a pair of psalms, often 3-4 psalms in a row, and sometimes larger collections like 10 or a dozen.

Here are two obvious collections, ones we know from the superscriptions:

PSALMS	SUPERSCRIPTION AS LINK
Pss 42-49	Psalms of the sons of Korah
Pss 120-134	Songs of Ascent

These (below) are less obvious, since they do not involve superscriptions. So let's do an exercise, and you find the links. The links that help us group the psalms below into collections are words or phrases (meaning repetition of the same word or phrase).

PSALM	WORDS AS A LINK
Ps 112	Look at just first and last verses, and compare with Pss before and after. How big is the mini-collection?
Ps 15	Look at the "never be moved" at the end of 15:5 (NAS "never be shaken"). Where does this phrase occur in either the psalm before or the psalm after?
Ps 61	Ps 61 has "rock" and "refuge" as word pictures for God (vv. 2-3). Where do these words occurred in either the psalm before or after?

There is a third way of grouping Pss into mini-collections. We can add use topics/themes that get mentioned in the middle of the Psalms.

This is harder work since it's not as obvious. And remember that an author can discuss the same topic using different words, like "king" in one Psalm, "Zion" in the next, and "rule" in yet another.

PSALM	TOPICS AS LINK
Ps 20-24	<p>These are about kingship, that God is the ultimate king and that the earthly king should longingly submit to this truth.</p> <p>Ps 20: "Zion," "the LORD's anointed," "May the King answer."</p> <p>Ps 21: "in Your strength the king will be glad," "crown," "the king trusts in the LORD."</p> <p>Ps 22: David the chosen king but being persecuted, attacked, people seek to kill him. And a reminder that "the kingdom is the LORD's, and He rules over the nation" (v. 28).</p> <p>Ps 23: "shepherd" is an ancient near eastern term for king. This follows on the heels of Ps 22, where David indeed goes through a dark and death-filled valley.</p> <p>Ps 24: The king of glory, the LORD of hosts, the true ruler in Zion.</p>
Pss 93-99	<p>Another collection of Yahweh kingship psalms, that is, psalms that proclaim that Yahweh is king.</p> <p>Ps 93 and Ps 99 both start with "The LORD reigns."</p> <p>Every psalm in this collection talks either about God reigning, or God judging, the whole earth.</p>
Pss 135-137	What's the connection?

# LESSON 3

## THE PSALMS, YOUR SOUL, AND PSALM 46

Trent Hunter

### 3.1 USE THE PSALMS PERSONALLY

3.11 What do we do with the Psalms?

3.12 What do the Psalms do with us?

### 3.2 USE THE PSALMS DAILY

3.21 Don Whitney's Psalm-a-Day plan

3.22 Psalms of the Day

Day 1 – Psalm 1, 31, 61, 91, 121  
 Day 2 – Psalm 2, 32, 62, 92, 122  
 Day 3 – Psalm 3, 33, 63, 93, 123  
 Day 4 – Psalm 4, 34, 64, 94, 124  
 Day 5 – Psalm 5, 35, 65, 95, 125  
 Day 6 – Psalm 6, 36, 66, 96, 126  
 Day 7 – Psalm 7, 37, 67, 97, 127  
 Day 8 – Psalm 8, 38, 68, 98, 128  
 Day 9 – Psalm 9, 39, 69, 99, 129  
 Day 10 – Psalm 10, 40, 70, 100, 130  
 Day 11 – Psalm 11, 41, 71, 101, 131  
 Day 12 – Psalm 12, 42, 72, 102, 132  
 Day 13 – Psalm 13, 43, 73, 103, 133  
 Day 14 – Psalm 14, 44, 74, 104, 134  
 Day 15 – Psalm 15, 45, 75, 105, 135

Day 16 – Psalm 16, 46, 76, 106, 136  
 Day 17 – Psalm 17, 47, 77, 107, 137  
 Day 18 – Psalm 18, 48, 78, 108, 138  
 Day 19 – Psalm 19, 49, 79, 109, 139  
 Day 20 – Psalm 20, 50, 80, 110, 140  
 Day 21 – Psalm 21, 51, 81, 111, 141  
 Day 22 – Psalm 22, 52, 82, 112, 142  
 Day 23 – Psalm 23, 53, 83, 113, 143  
 Day 24 – Psalm 24, 54, 84, 114, 144  
 Day 25 – Psalm 25, 55, 85, 115, 145  
 Day 26 – Psalm 26, 56, 86, 116, 146  
 Day 27 – Psalm 27, 57, 87, 117, 147  
 Day 28 – Psalm 28, 58, 88, 118, 148  
 Day 29 – Psalm 29, 59, 89, 119, 149  
 Day 30 – Psalm 30, 60, 90, 120, 150  
 Day 31 – Psalm 119

### 3.3 USE THE PSALMS SKILLFULLY

#### 3.31 Remember the Plan of God

Ask, *Where is the book of Psalms in God's plan of redemption?*

#### 3.32 Note the Position

Ask, *Where is this Psalm in the book of Psalms? (the 5 books, smaller collections, etc.)*

#### 3.33 Feel the Pivots

Ask, *What changes do you notice? (kind, subject, object, topic, voice, setting, tense, tone, point of view, etc.)*

#### 3.34 Discern the Parts

Ask, *How did the author structure this Psalm?*

#### 3.35 Hear the Parallels

Ask, *What lines are parallel and how do they relate? (synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, climactic, emblematic, simplifying, etc.)*

#### 3.36 See the Pictures

Ask, *What images does the author employ? (symbolism, metaphor, simile, etc.)*

#### 3.37 Sense the Pitch

Ask, *What is the emotional shape of the Psalm?*

#### 3.38 Embrace the Purpose

Ask, *Why did the Lord give this Psalm to his people?*

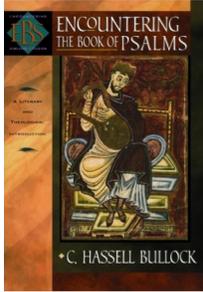
## 3.4 AN EXAMPLE: PSALM 46

TO THE CHOIRMASTER. OF THE SONS OF KORAH.  
ACCORDING TO ALAMOTH. A SONG.

- 1 God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.
- 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,  
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,  
3 though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble at its swelling. *Selah*
- 4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High.
- 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.
- 6 The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
- 7 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*
- 8 Come, behold the works of the LORD,  
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
- 9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the chariots with fire.
- 10 “Be still, and know that I am God.  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth!”
- 11 The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. *Selah*

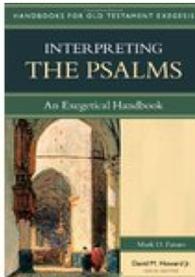
### 3.4 BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### *Introductions to Studying the Psalms*



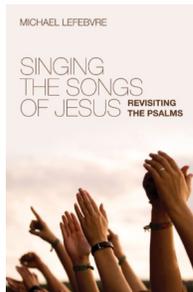
Bullock, C. Hassell.  
2001 *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

A thicker, larger paperback (\$30), this has much more detail than either of the above introductory books. Each part and chapter covers a different topic, such as structure of the book of Psalms, kinds of psalms (not just categories like “lament” but subcategories), theology in the psalms, and psalms as worship. To give an example of detail, the topic of “Torah psalms” might get a half-page mention in the above books by Longman and Futato. In this book it gets its own chapter of 14 pages. Some of this book definitely has a more scholarly feel (e.g., a section on what psalms were found in the Qumran caves of the Dead Sea Scrolls). The book has several indices at the back.



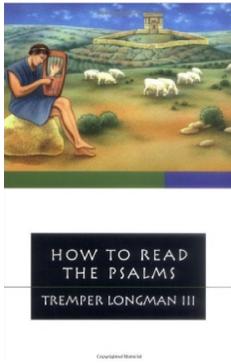
Futato, Mark D.  
2007 *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.

This does assume a knowledge of Hebrew, and is used as a textbook in seminaries for courses on the Psalms. So think of a graduate-level version of an introduction to Psalms, covering poetry, genres, purpose/message/themes of the Psalms, and various issues in interpreting and preaching the Psalms.



LeFebvre, Michael.  
2010 *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus.

This is not a book about music (theory or practice), but a very well-written book, on an introductory level, about the power and practice of psalmody (singing Psalms). It also has interesting sections on the temple hymnwriting teams, doctrines in the psalms, and the use of psalms in worship, and how David related to the psalms (not just as author but king). Going back to psalmody and worship, the last half of the book discusses the psalms as conversations either led by Jesus, or sung to Him.

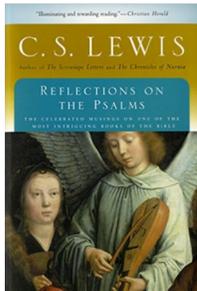


Longman, Tremper III.

1988 *How to Read the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

This is the lay version of Futato's book below. No knowledge of Hebrew needed. Longman covers issues like poetry, genre, development of the Psalter, and use of Psalms in the New Testament. He ends the book by looking in greater detail at three Psalms.

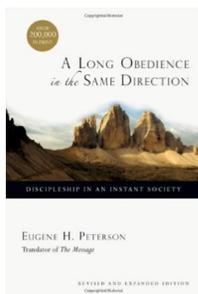
### Miscellaneous Books on Psalms



Lewis, C. S.

1958 *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

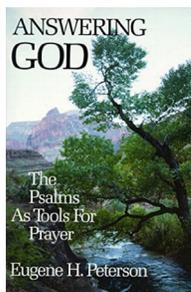
This is (by Lewis's own admission, p. 1) not a work of scholarship, being more like one schoolboy comparing notes with another in describing the difficulties met and joys gained in reading the Psalms. Most reviewers admit that this is not one of Lewis's better books. And conservatives (in their view of Scripture) would take issue with some of his views. For instance, Lewis says that "The reaction of the Psalmists to injury, though profoundly natural, is profoundly wrong" (p. 26). And on pp. 111-112 he seems to advocate the view that the Bible doesn't equal the Word of God but carries or contains the Word of God.



Peterson, Eugene H.

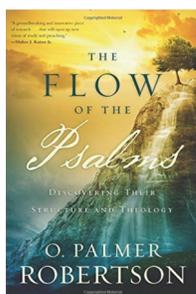
2000 *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*. Rev. ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Each chapter is a devotional on one of the Psalms of Ascent (Pss 120-134). Peterson sees encouragement from these psalms we as Christians as modern pilgrims, as we grow in worship. One reviewer said this is a great book to slow down and reflect, to see things one has already learned with new eyes. "Like the songs sung on the journey, it is not so much intended to impart new information, but to bring back into mind (and spirit) the old things, the ancient things—the things that have the power to redeem us and heal us" (amazon review).



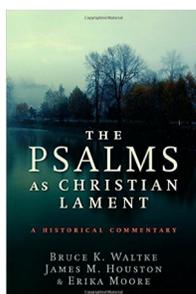
Peterson, Eugene H.  
1990 *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. New York: HarperCollins.

As the subtitle states, this is a book for how to pray using the psalms. Our prayers are responses to God's acting, speaking, and revealing. God initiates in prayer, not us. Each chapter is more topical: topics like metaphor, enemies in the psalms, and liturgy. This book has a very small amount of Hebrew discussed, but it's still very much a book for laity and not scholars. One reviewer liked it to a C.S. Lewis book (that level, as well as interest).



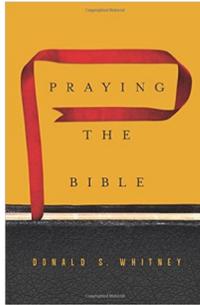
Robertson, O. Palmer.  
1990 *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

This is a fairly thick paperback (almost 300 pages including several indices). It does have some interaction with scholarly bibliography, but is still written on a level that any serious Bible student could understand (no knowledge of Hebrew needed, for instance). This is the best book on understanding the whole Psalter as a book of five books. That is, the structure and development from Book 1 to Book 5.



Waltke, Bruce W.; Houston, James H.; and Moore, Erika.  
2014 *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

This is definitely a more scholarly book, so not one of your first two or three books on the Psalms. Over 300 pages, with several indices at the back, and frequent interaction with bibliography in the pages of each chapter. Ten psalms of lament are covered (as representative psalms of lament, since there are by some counts over 60 psalms of lament total). Each psalm is covered in two parts. First, the history of study on that Psalm (for instance, what an early church father, or reformer from the 1500's, said about that psalm. Second, exegesis (commentary) on the psalm from the authors of this book. Again, though the title looks inviting, this is not a good first introduction to lament since it is more scholarly.



Whitney, Donald S.

2015 *Praying the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

This is a short book helping Christians to use the Bible as a help in prayer. Don Whitney is an author famous for his writing and speaking on spiritual disciplines, so prayer is a subject he's reflected on quite a bit. He includes a chapter here, titled, "Praying the Psalms." Tim Challies, in his review of this book, says, "This book is premised on the existence of a very common problem: That prayer is difficult." Then he quotes the book: "I maintain that people—truly born-again, genuinely Christian people—often do not pray simply because they do not feel like it. And the reason they don't feel like praying is that when they do pray, they tend to say the same old things about the same old things."