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*of a*  
SUFFERING  
KING

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SONGS  
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SUFFERING  
KING

*The Grand Christ Hymn of Psalms 1–8*

J. V. Fesko



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
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*Songs of a Suffering King*

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*To*  
Bryan Estelle



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## Preface

I believe that the book of Psalms is vitally needed for the life and spiritual well-being of the church. Sadly, the Psalms no longer have a place of prominence in the worship of the broader church or even within many Reformed churches. Perhaps part of the reason for this dearth of the Psalms is the church's unfamiliarity with this wonderful, divinely inspired hymnbook. I hope this little book helps to awaken the church to the majesty, beauty, and splendor of the book of Psalms. May people long to read and discover Christ in the Psalms so that they follow in the footsteps of the disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus taught them all the things concerning His ministry written in "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Scriptural psalms should be a regular staple in our personal spiritual diet, whether we read, pray, or sing them in public or private worship. To that end I have included metrical versions of Psalms 1–8 from several different sources and have listed a suitable tune that can be accessed on the Internet to go along with each one.

I am grateful for a number of people who played a role in helping me complete this book: Jay Collier at Reformation Heritage Books, who approached me about the

possibility of writing another book for them; Joel Beeke and the RHB staff for their willingness and all their work to publish the book; and my wife and three children (Val, Rob, and Carmen), not only for their sacrifice so that I have time to work on writing projects but also for their love and support. Thank you, Anneke, for your love and encouragement to write this book! It was your wonderful idea. I just hope that what I have written meets the mark, edifies the church, and brings glory to Christ our Savior.

I dedicate this book to my colleague and good friend Bryan Estelle, professor of Old Testament at Westminster Seminary California and minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Bryan is a good colleague and careful scholar, but in his heart of hearts he is a churchman through and through. And like most good churchmen, he does not trumpet his service, so people know little of his sacrifice for and service to Christ's church. Bryan spent the last few years working on the Psalter-Hymnal Committee for our denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He has dutifully served on this committee by translating the entire Psalter so the members would have access to the treasures of the Scriptures in the original Hebrew. My prayer is that Bryan's labors, along with those of the rest of the committee, would return a tremendous and bountiful harvest in the worship and piety of Christians for generations to come.

—J. V. Fesko  
Escondido, California

# Introduction

Andrew Fletcher, an eighteenth-century Scottish writer, once observed that if a person were permitted to write the songs of a nation, he had no concern about who might create its laws.<sup>1</sup> Fletcher's idea was that music has great power to shape the life, practice, and ethos of a people. Songs have been written to rally nations to war, comfort people in the midst of great sorrow and despair, and cheer and gladden the heart in times of celebration. For example, if you watch the Olympics, you have probably seen Olympic athletes perched atop the medal stand who are overcome with emotion when their national anthem plays. Some readers may recall how music from the 1960s rallied and steeled the resolve of many young people in the United States against the Vietnam War. Songs like Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" come to mind. How many times have you been riding in the car and heard an old song on the radio that brought back a flood of memories, perhaps of a specific place, time, or people? I can remember hearing Aaron Copland's "Fanfare

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1. Andrew Fletcher, *An Account of a Conversation Concerning the Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good of Mankind* (Edinburgh, 1703), 10.

for the Common Man” for the first time and feeling a lump form in my throat because the music gripped me in a powerful way.

Music is powerful, and it can be misused. However, in the hands of our faithful covenant Lord, it has been rightly embedded in the life of the covenant community, the church, through the Bible’s songbook, the Psalms. The book of Psalms, also called the Psalter, is the biggest book in the Bible, but for many in the church its contents are largely mysterious and out of sight. Many people in the church are familiar with certain psalms such as Psalm 23 or perhaps Psalms 2 and 110. Some people might drift toward the end of the Psalter when they are in search of words of praise or thanksgiving in times of prayer or scriptural meditation. Two important characteristics about the Psalter, however, might not immediately register in the minds of some of its readers.

First, the *entire* Psalter is connected to the person and work of Christ. One statement I have frequently heard is that there are certain christological psalms—in other words, psalms that explicitly reveal Christ, such as Psalm 2, in which the Lord’s Anointed, the Messiah, is enthroned. But when Jesus was walking on the road to Emmaus with His two disciples, He told them: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). A quick perusal of the number of times different psalms appear in the New Testament through direct quotation, echo, or allusion indicates that Jesus did not

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have just a few isolated psalms in mind.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that Christ explicitly appears, as He does in Psalm 2, in every psalm. Rather, a particular psalm might have the Messiah as a subject; it could describe aspects of His work such as intercession, or it might provide a prophetic window into His sufferings.

One of the things that readers of the Psalter should realize is that even though King David, the principal author of the Psalter, writes of his own sorrows, troubles, victories, and praises, he is a type, or foreshadow, of his Greater Son, Jesus, who is the antitype, or fulfillment. What the Psalms say of David as a messiah (remember, *messiah* means “anointed,” and he was Israel’s anointed king) is prophetic of Jesus as *the* Messiah. Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed this connection between David and Jesus:

According to the witness of the Bible, David, as the anointed king of the chosen people of God, is a prototype of Jesus Christ. What befalls David occurs for the sake of the one who is in him and who is to proceed from him, namely Jesus Christ. David did not remain unaware of this, but “being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ” [Acts 2:30].

Bonhoeffer remarks that David prefigured Christ in his kingly office, his life, and his words. And even the

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2. See, for example, the thirty-two columns of references to the Psalter in the index of *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1176–82.

words that David prayed were ultimately Christ's. Hence, "this short observation about the New Testament sheds significant light on the entire Psalter. It refers the Psalter to Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Second, I suspect that most Psalter readers assume that the book is randomly arranged, like a potpourri or grab bag of theological observations. But there is a specific organizational structure to the whole Psalter that is most readily observable in its fivefold division. In fact, according to ancient rabbinic tradition, Moses gave Israel the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), and David gave the nation the five books of the Psalter (Book 1: Psalms 1–41; Book 2: Psalms 42–72; Book 3: Psalms 73–89; Book 4: Psalms 90–106; Book 5: Psalms 107–150).<sup>4</sup> Many have noted that Psalm 1 serves as the broad introduction to the whole book, as the psalmist reflects upon the righteous man who delights in the "law of the LORD" (v. 2), which, in this context, refers not to the Decalogue but to the Lord's teaching in general—that is, what we find in the rest of the 149 psalms. In the subsequent books of the Psalter, each section ends with doxology and praise, and there are royal psalms at the seams of the first three books, such as Psalms 2, 72, and 89.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Prayerbook of the Bible*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Miller and Albrecht Schonherr (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 5:158–59.

4. Gerald Henry Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 199–200.

5. Wilson, *Hebrew Psalter*, 208.

We can observe some of the deliberate editorial arrangement of the Psalter when we consider the “bookends” of Book 1, which begins with Psalm 2 (assuming that Psalm 1 is the introduction to the entire Psalter) and ends with Psalm 41. Psalm 2 introduces the Davidic covenant, even though it is not specifically mentioned (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14). In Psalm 2 David writes:

“I will declare the decree:  
The LORD has said to Me,  
‘You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.  
Ask of Me, and I will give You  
The nations for Your inheritance,  
And the ends of the earth for Your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron;  
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s  
vessel.” (vv. 7–9)

God promises the Davidic scion that despite the scheming of the kings of the earth (vv. 2–3), He will ensure that His throne remains secure, a theme that resurfaces in Psalm 41:

Blessed is he who considers the poor;  
The LORD will deliver him in time of trouble.  
The LORD will preserve him and keep him alive,  
And he will be blessed on the earth;  
You will not deliver him to the will of his enemies....

By this I know that You are well pleased with me,  
Because my enemy does not triumph over me.  
As for me, You uphold me in my integrity,

And set me before Your face forever.

(vv. 1–2, 11–12)<sup>6</sup>

The deliberate ordering of the psalms has important implications for how we read the book.

Rather than reading each psalm as an independent set of observations, we should instead view each as comprising a chapter in one grand story. Think of the chapters of the Psalter like the songs on a music album. Musicians have resisted the move from albums (CDs, cassettes, and vinyl LPs for those of us who are a bit older) to the iTunes world because they arranged the songs on their albums in a specific way to tell a story. But in the iTunes generation, a person can pick and choose the songs he wants—he can buy one song or several, but in the end the consumer “ruins” the final artistic product. Whether iTunes has ruined music albums is beside the point, but the analogy bears upon our reading and use of the Psalter. Seldom do readers recognize that the book of Psalms is telling a story, with each subsequent psalm serving a distinct function and purpose within the broader narrative. The challenge in observing the narrative pattern over the course of the whole Psalter can be daunting in this large book. However, we can peer into the beautiful literary structure and ordering of the Psalter through the examination of one small portion of it. In this case, we will examine Psalms 1–8.

I suspect that many people are familiar with Psalms 1, 2, and 8 because they appear at the beginning of the Psalter and deal with familiar themes. Most of us open a book and start by reading the first chapter. And in the case of

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6. Wilson, *Hebrew Psalter*, 209–10.



themes such as the Messiah or the creation of man, Psalms 2 and 8 feature prominently. However, what about Psalms 3–7? For many Christians, these psalms probably represent uncharted territory. But if we keep in mind the intentional ordering of the Psalter, then the ground between Psalms 2 and 8 creates new questions. The whole Psalter is about Christ, so Psalm 1 speaks of the righteous man, ultimately Christ, who is blessed by God; Psalm 2 then segues to the enthronement of that righteous man, the Messiah. Psalm 8 initially appears to be about the creation of the first Adam, but in the hands of New Testament authors it is authoritatively applied to the last Adam, Jesus Christ (cf. Ps. 8; 1 Cor. 15:20–28). But what about the intervening passages? How can Psalm 2 end on a mountaintop with the enthronement of the Messiah and then descend into the valley of despair with the psalmist crying out to the Lord for deliverance from his enemies in Psalms 3–7?

Some might think that royal identity and suffering are mutually exclusive categories; the apostle Peter was of this mind-set when he rebuked Christ for what he perceived to be “negative talk” of suffering and crucifixion—ideas that the apostle initially believed were antithetical to his concept of a victorious Messiah. Peter, of course, merited Christ’s quick and stinging rebuke (Matt. 16:22–28). Royal identity as the King of kings and suffering are not mutually exclusive categories, as the life of Christ manifestly demonstrates. Jesus was both the long-ago prophesied Davidic heir to the throne of Israel and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah in chapters 40–55. The motif of the suffering king unquestionably plays out in David’s life on numerous occasions. The prophet Samuel anointed

David as king only for Saul to persecute and try to kill him (1 Sam. 16–31). We can only imagine David’s descent into utter despair from the exhilaration of being anointed king. Such a pattern fits the unfolding narrative of Psalms 2–7, which then ends on a high note of praise and exaltation. In other words, we see that David prefigures Jesus in his mountaintop experience that ends in despair when Christ’s glorious birth, attended by the angelic host and accompanied by gifts of royalty, quickly descends into fleeing from persecution and those who sought to kill Him, which continues in His ministry and culminates in His death. But Christ’s death was not the final word; rather, Christ’s exaltation through His resurrection and royal inauguration was the penultimate step in the completion of His work, only to be followed by His second coming.

When we become aware of this unfolding narrative pattern in the Psalter as a whole and Psalms 1–8 more narrowly, we read the Psalms in the light of Christ, which opens a new vista upon David’s cries of dereliction. David’s cries become those of Christ. Though the passage lies beyond the scope of this modest book, Christ’s cry of dereliction upon the cross—“My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”—confirms the David-Jesus connection (Ps. 22:1). So often the Gospels record Christ in times of prayer, but we never know the specific content of His prayers. And while we ultimately cannot know the specific content of Christ’s prayers, except for what is recorded in the Gospels, the book of Psalms can give us an idea of the types of things that Christ might have prayed. It can provide a divinely inspired window into the heart of Christ. Ultimately, the Psalter as a whole trumpets the person and

work of Christ, and we can examine a small slice of the Psalter's grand Christ hymn in Psalms 1–8.

What follows in each of the subsequent chapters is a devotional exploration of the first eight psalms. Each chapter explores the psalm in its original context. In other words, what was occurring in the life of David to occasion the psalm? After establishing the original historical context, we can consider the connections to Christ. In what way does the psalm speak of Christ? Last, after establishing the connections to Christ, we then consider the connections to the church, those who are united to Christ. In other words, when we read of the blessed man of Psalm 1, our thoughts should drift to how we might flee wickedness and render our obedience to God only after we have considered him in historical context and how he is connected to Christ.

Whatever obedience we might offer, even as regenerate Christians, is always tainted and stained with sin. As the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?” It then answers: “The righteousness which can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law, while even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin” (Q. 62). Rather, if we recognize that David has one person in mind—namely, the man Jesus—then the gates of paradise are opened. Christ is the One who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked or stood in the way of sinners or sat in the seat of scoffers. The Lord has recognized Christ's righteousness, or obedience, and has blessed Him. When we ask how we can apply

Psalm 1, if we first focus upon Christ as the righteous man, we can then acknowledge that anyone united to Him receives the blessings He has secured. Only then, in Christ as branches united to the one true vine, can we meditate upon the law of God and delight in it and yield the fruit of righteousness in its season.

In addition to each exposition, I have included a series of questions to spark further reflection and study, whether privately or with a small group such as a Sunday school class or Bible study. But I would be remiss if I did not encourage readers not only to study the Psalter but also to sing it. Granted, the Psalter has been called the prayer book of the Bible and has assisted countless Christians in their prayers, whether in times of joy or sorrow, plenty or want. But as sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer John Calvin once observed, biblical worship songs are simply prayers in song form. What better way, then, to cement the truths of the psalm you have just studied than to use it in prayer and private and public worship? To facilitate the singing of these psalms, each chapter concludes with a metrical version of it. If you do not know how to play the piano, you can find a number of resources available on the Internet that include digital files of the tunes for each psalm so you can sing the psalm either alone or with a group. You need not choose between writing a nation's songs or laws. Instead, you can sing the law of God (His teaching) as it has been revealed in the Psalter. The old saying from Augustine remains relevant to us: "*Tolle et lege*" (Take up and read)! To this we can add, "*Tolle et cantare*" (Take up and sing)!

## ► Resources for Psalm Singing

### Internet

[www.psalter.org](http://www.psalter.org)

This website has a terrific library of MP3 files and includes tunes associated with the *Trinity Psalter*, *The Book of Psalms for Worship*, and *The Book of Psalms for Singing*.

[www.psalter.com](http://www.psalter.com)

This website is devoted exclusively to *The Book of Psalms for Singing* and has the entire Psalter along with digital MP3 files.

### Psalters

*Trinity Psalter: Psalms 1–150 Words-Only Edition*, ed. Terry Johnson (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 1994).

This is a great resource and has one version of each of the 150 psalms. This edition is words only, but you can find the tunes either online or in other hymnals or you can purchase the piano-player's edition, which has the music: *Trinity Psalter: Music Edition* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2000).

*The Book of Psalms for Singing* (Pittsburgh: The Board of Education and Publication, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1998).

This is a well-done psalter that often has multiple versions of the same psalms or lengthier psalms divided into smaller sections. You can find all the tunes for this psalter at [www.psalter.com](http://www.psalter.com), which is a great aid for personal or family devotions. This version is set up like a hymnal,

which means it has the music and words together for those of you who can read music.

*The Psalter: With Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and Added Chorale Section* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999).

This classic psalter dates back to 1893, when the United Presbyterian Church in North America initiated a nine-denominational effort to produce a metrical version of the Psalms. It features a rich array of tunes, often offering several versions of particular psalms. Also helpful is a chorale section, which includes English translations with Genevan tunes from Calvin's *Genevan Psalter*. It presents both words and music, which is helpful for those who read music.