

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* [Fortress, 1993], p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 6 [Funk and Wagnalls, 1882], p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Trueman, “*The Marcions Have Landed!*”

<<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-marcions-have-landed/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy and Julie Tennent, *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* [Seedbed Publishing <psalms.seedbed.com>, 2017], pp. ix–x.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* [Augsburg, 1970], p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> See Augustine’s exposition of Psalm 3; compare Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 12:12–13, 27.

<sup>8</sup> John D. Witvliet, “Words to Grow Into: the Psalms as Formative Speech,” in C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, ed., *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship* [B & H Publishing, 2012], pp. 7–16.

<sup>9</sup> For more help in understanding the poetry of the Psalms, see Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* [InterVarsity Press, 1988], pp. 111–122.

<sup>10</sup> For more help in understanding the Psalms as praising conversations, see Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus* [Christian Focus, 2010].

<sup>11</sup> “Allegory” means using characters, stories, or things to stand for truths, ideas, or other characters. When people read the Bible this way (using “allegorical interpretation”), they look for a deeper meaning beneath the plain, surface meaning. Throughout church history, some allegorical interpreters untethered their imaginations; they made up meanings that weren’t really supported by the text. That’s wrong. Even so, for some things, people, events, or patterns in the Bible, the plain, surface meaning is important, but it’s also meant to carry deeper meaning (i.e., symbols and types). When we interpret these the way the New Testament itself explains them (like how it connects Old Testament events and prophecies to Jesus and his followers), we’re not just guessing arbitrarily. We’re following what God has already shown us. For more help in understanding this, see Vern S. Poythress, *Biblical Typology* [Crossway, 2024].

<sup>12</sup> For more help in understanding Christ as the “I” of the Psalms, see Bruce K. Waltke & Fred G. Zaspel, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* [Crossway, 2023].

<sup>13</sup> I owe this metaphor to Timothy and Julie Tennent, *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* [Seedbed Publishing <psalms.seedbed.com>, 2017].

<sup>14</sup> I owe this metaphor to Scott Aniol, *Musing on God’s Music: Forming Hearts of Praise with the Psalms* [G3 Press, 2023].

<sup>15</sup> For more help in understanding the structure of the book of Psalms, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: discovering their structure and theology* [P&R, 2015].

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 25–26.

## Singing Psalms in a New Covenant Key *Can New Covenant Believers Sing Psalms as Christian Songs?*

by Larry E. Wilson, February 12, 2026

When did you last sing a Psalm in church? Most evangelicals today rarely do. Many think we shouldn’t. There are plausible reasons to think that and to balk at singing Psalms. The Psalms never mention Jesus by name. They contain hard statements. They use old covenant language. They feel outmoded and incongruous with our position as new covenant believers. Singing them seems to go against our desire to share the gospel of God’s grace in Christ.

### Earlier Generations of Christians Thought We Can Sing Psalms as Christian Songs

Still, Jesus and his apostles sang Psalms—and not just before his death, resurrection, and ascension (see Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, where they sang Psalms 113–118), but also afterward (see Acts 4:24–26, where “they lifted their voices together to God” using Psalm 146 and Psalm 2). Hughes Oliphant Old observes, “The Psalms formed the core of the praises of the New Testament church ...”<sup>1</sup> It’s not hard to reckon why. Not only were they following the example of Jesus and the apostles but also, they were obeying God’s command for new covenant believers to sing “*psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*” (Colossians 3:16; cf. Ephesians 5:19). However these three terms are rightly understood, at the very least, God himself tells us to *include* Psalms as a noticeable portion of our worship songs.

Indeed, from the 1st to the 18th centuries, Psalms were the main songs in Christian worship. Congregational singing petered out during the Middle Ages when choirs took over, but the Protestant Reformation brought it back, and once again Psalms were central. John Calvin pushed for singing mostly Psalms in church. Martin Luther wrote and encouraged hymns based on Scripture, but he still insisted, “The whole Psalter, Psalm by Psalm, should remain in use.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite that, by the 19th century, Charles Spurgeon was lamenting their loss: “It is to be feared that the Psalms are by no means so prized as in earlier ages of the church.”<sup>3</sup> In our day, Carl Trueman is still lamenting it:

“It astounds me—given the overwhelming use of Psalms as central to gathered worship in the first four centuries; the absolute importance given to psalmody for the first two centuries of the post-Reformation Reformed churches, and the fact that the Book of Psalms is the only hymn book which can claim to be universal in its acceptance by the whole of Christendom and utterly inspired in all of its statements—it astounds me that so few Psalms are sung in our worship services today.”<sup>4</sup>

Timothy and Julie Tennent observe:

“The radical shift of worship in the contemporary period is not the emergence of new hymns or choruses as acts of worship. The radical shift has been the separation of worship from the Psalms. By the twentieth century, much of the church had witnessed the erosion of the Psalms as the foundation for worship.”<sup>5</sup>

But does it really hurt anything to neglect the Psalms in our worship? Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought so. He maintained, “Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power.”<sup>6</sup>

The main barrier to that recovery in our day would seem to be the inertia of our longstanding evangelical traditions, reinforced by the fact that we find it hard to see Psalms as relevant to our new covenant setting. Earlier generations of Christians thought we can sing Psalms as Christian songs, but today’s evangelicals think in good faith that we can’t.

## Can new covenant believers sing Psalms as Christian songs?

That raises the question: *can new covenant believers sing Psalms as Christian songs?* If we stand firmly on **two key biblical principles** and flesh out what they imply, we’ll see that yes, we can.

**First, the living God intended the Psalms for new covenant believers.** Look at Romans 15:3–4—“For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, *‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on*

## Christ-centered Commentaries on the Psalms

- Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*, 4 volumes [Crossway, 2024].
- Peter H. Holtvluwer, *Christ’s Psalms, Our Psalms—Study Resource*, 4 volumes [Reformed Perspective Press (Carman, Manitoba, Canada, 2020). IN THE U.S.A—<<https://reformedfellowship.net/products/christs-psalms-our-psalms-study-resource-4-vols>> IN CANADA—<<https://www.providencebookspress.com/product-page/christ-s-psalms-our-psalms-4-volume-set-study-resource-holtvluwer>>].
- Douglas D. Webster, *The Psalms: Jesus’s Prayer Book*, 4 volumes [Kregel, 2023].

## Introductory Books:

- Andrew G. Shead, *Walk His Way: Following Christ through the book of Psalms* [IVP, 2023].
- Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* [Christian Focus, 2011].
- Scott Aniol, *Musing on God’s Music: Forming Hearts of Praise with the Psalms* [G3 Press, 2023].
- Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* [Crossway, 2013].

## Collections of Helpful Essays and Lectures by Varied Authors:

- Andrew G. Shead, ed., *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church* [APOLLOS (imprint of IVP), 2013].
- C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, ed., *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship* [B & H Publishing, 2012].
- Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio, ed., *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century* [Reformation Heritage Books, 2010].

*God willing, I hope to follow this booklet with (a) resource(s) that will expand on this material and make suggestions for pastors and worship leaders toward making the Psalms more foundational for their worship services. ~LEW*

<sup>1</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* [John Knox Press, 1984], p. 44. Old goes on to show that, though Psalms formed the core of their praises, they did sing other songs as well.

A big part of the way you grow is by doing in faith what God calls you to do. Be willing, then, to muddle along, trusting Jesus all the while. If something in a Psalm confuses or troubles you, note it, pray about it, and study it later using a study Bible or commentary. Feel free to ask fellow Christians or a pastor for advice or insight. Take heart from Deitrich Bonhoeffer's claim about the Psalms:

"When [used] only occasionally, these prayers (*or songs*) are too overwhelming in design and power and tend to turn us back to more palatable fare. But whoever has begun to pray (*or sing*) the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers (*or songs*) and say: 'Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter' (Luther). ... Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power."<sup>16</sup>

Has this "incomparable treasure" vanished from your life or your church? God helping us, let's do our part to recover it and experience its "unsuspected power." Let's do what we can to start including the Psalms as a significant part of our personal devotions, of our family worship, of our congregational worship! They come from Jesus; they're about Jesus; they help guide us into authenticity, depth, and breadth in communion with Jesus. Let's sing them frequently! Let's sing them in faith! Let's sing them with fervor! Let's sing them with understanding! Let's sing them in a new covenant key, always looking to Jesus, having our hearts richly indwelt and filled by his Word and Spirit.

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## SUGGESTED HELPS:

### Brief Christ-centered meditations through all the Psalms:

- Timothy and Julie Tennent, *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* [Seedbed Publishing <psalms.seedbed.com>, 2017].
- Dane Ortlund, *In the Lord I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions Through the Psalms* (Crossway, 2021)
- Michael Ross, *The Light of the Psalms* [Christian Focus, 2006].
- Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus* [Viking, 2015].

*me.*" Notice that verse 3 quotes from Psalm 69, then verse 4 explains: "For whatever was written in former days was written for *our* instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures *we* might have hope." In fact, the whole Old Testament was written "for our instruction" as new covenant believers "on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). The Psalms weren't written directly *to* us, but they were definitely written *for* us.

**Accordingly, second, the Holy Spirit designed every Psalm to reveal Jesus and life in union with him.** Jesus insisted that the Psalms (along with all Scripture) are about *him* (see Luke 24:25–27, 44; John 5:39–40). All Scripture is therefore ultimately messianic; that includes the Psalms. The New Testament quotes the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book, as fulfilled in Christ—his coming, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and church.

Augustine put it this way: the Psalms are about "the whole Christ, Head and members."<sup>7</sup> They really do speak of Jesus and life in him—both for individuals and for the church. And not just in our present experience. They also anticipate the coming judgment and everlasting glory. Even if we don't understand all the ways they do this, the fact remains that they do. The original human writers didn't fully understand either (see 1 Peter 1:10–12), but the Holy Spirit did!

**Together, these two principles imply that we need to start learning how to better understand Psalms in light of their fulfillment in Christ.**

How do we learn how to better understand Psalms in light of their fulfillment in Christ? Our key is how the New Testament uses them. If we imitate how the New Testament uses Psalms, we can learn to sing and pray them in a new covenant key. How do we do that? Let me suggest six rules of thumb.

**Six rules of thumb toward learning to sing Psalms in a new covenant key**

### 1. Treat each Psalm as words God inspired to shape your response to him.

Psalms are both God’s Word to us and Spirit-inspired prayer-poems for us to speak back to God. God didn’t give them just to provide words to express what we already think and feel. More importantly, he gave them to train and mold us to think and feel in a godly manner. The Psalms are “formative speech,” says John Witvliet; these words that we speak or sing “are not only acts of expression but also acts of ‘alignment’ or submission that challenge us as worshippers to speak words that we are still ‘growing into.’”<sup>8</sup> When you sing or pray a Psalm, let its contents and priorities grip your mind and heart. Let its poetic form—its structure, its parallelism, its vivid imagery—grip your imagination and heart.<sup>9</sup> As the Holy Spirit speaks in the Psalm to mold and shape your heart, yield to him.

### 2. Look for a “praising conversation” in each Psalm, with different voices going in different directions.

Sometimes the LORD’s Anointed speaks—to God, to his people, to himself, or to the world. Sometimes God’s people speak—to God about their King, to their King, to each other, to the world. Jesus is always at the center, leading the conversation and mediating it (see Hebrews 2:12). When you sing a Psalm, try to be alert to who is speaking to whom. Watch for clues like who is addressed (“O God,” “O my soul,” “all you lands”) and shifts between singular (“I/me”) and plural (“we/us”).<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Accordingly, in each Psalm you sing, look for the LORD’s Anointed.

Look for (and keep looking to) Jesus, your King. The Psalms are mainly about David and God’s covenant promise to him (see 2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17). And Jesus is the ultimate “David.” He’s the Anointed King not only of whom the Psalms speak, but also who speaks in the Psalms. When you sing about the King in a Psalm, think of Jesus.

Note well: this is not arbitrary “allegorizing.”<sup>11</sup> No, God himself tells us that David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, was a prophet who “foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ” (Acts 2:31). David was the LORD’s Anointed (Messiah in Old Testament Hebrew, Christ in New Testament Greek). It was as the Anointed that he wrote his psalms,

Also, try to understand *the whole book of Psalms* as a complete, unified “cantata.”<sup>14</sup> Keep aiming towards learning to be able to sing and pray all the Psalms in the entire book of Psalms. Indeed, the entire book is a journey in itself. It starts out heavy with lament and ends up heavy with praise. The 150 Psalms together form a unified “cantata” that traces the unfolding of the promised Davidic kingdom—

- *its rise:*
  - Book 1 (Psalms 1–41) introduces the kingdom established under David and how God preserved his Anointed One.
  - Book 2 (Psalms 42–72) carries the story further, exploring how David’s rule was extended under David’s dynasty).
- *its fall:*
  - Book 3 (Psalms 73–89) sees the kingdom break apart and both the northern and southern parts fall. It wrestles with whether God has forsaken the Davidic Covenant.
- *its future hope:*
  - Book 4 (Psalms 90–106) rejoices that, even though God’s anointed leaders on earth have failed and God’s people are in exile, the LORD is still reigning and is still faithful.
  - Book 5 (Psalms 107–150) builds anticipation for the post-exile hope that somehow God will keep his covenant; somehow his Anointed Davidic King will yet reign on earth.

Having some awareness of this structure can not only help you see how the whole book points to Jesus; it can also help you appreciate how each Psalm can be applied by its context in the whole Book of Psalms.<sup>15</sup>

### Encouragement: you don’t need to master these rules of thumb before you can start singing Psalms with benefit.

The Psalter is like a rich gold mine—many treasures are right on the surface and easy to find, but you can keep digging forever and ever and still never exhaust it. Spirit-indwelt believers in Jesus tend instinctively to more or less follow these guidelines. Just start where you are, keep learning, and keep growing over time. Sanctification takes a lifetime.

new covenant key, then, it deepens our emphasis on this evangelistic facet of even “the imprecatory Psalms.”

What’s more, the New Testament deepens our understanding that our Lord’s (and our own) true enemies are not just external and visible. We not only have a great enemy in the world but also in the demonic forces driving it (see 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; 6:12). The New Testament also deepens our understanding that the mode of our warfare is now different. We no longer wage war “according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). What might this mean, for example, when you sing Psalm 149 in a new covenant key—“*Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations ... to execute on them the judgment written!*” (vv. 6–9)? Remember that in these last days, this battle is for human hearts. Think of the “two-edged swords” of verse 6 as God’s Word (the “sword of the Spirit,” Ephesians 6:17; cf. Hebrews 4:12). If the rebels remain in their sins—if they don’t escape the judgment of Psalm 149:6–9 by fleeing to Christ in faith—then they’ll face it on the Last Day. In the meantime, we’re to openly proclaim the law and the gospel. Throughout, the war continues to rage. Indeed, the most pernicious enemy we must fight to the death is our own sinful flesh (see Romans 8:13).

When you sing Psalms, then, let them wean you from the friendship with the world that is enmity with God (see James 4:4). Let them fortify your love of God and your hatred of sin and evil. Let them remind you of the impending doom of the ungodly—why they’re in such great need of the great salvation that’s found in Christ alone. Let them stoke your evangelistic and missionary zeal.

#### **6. When you sing Psalms, look for the plot, the big picture.**

Try to understand *each Psalm* as a complete, unified “journey.”<sup>13</sup> Aim to sing and pray entire Psalms when possible (except maybe Psalm 119, which is already divided into 22 parts). Many Psalms start with lament or crisis and then journey to praise and trust. Don’t just pick favorite portions—you’ll miss the full emotional and spiritual impact of the journey God designed. Keep aiming towards learning to sing and pray entire Psalms.

speaking prophetically, inspired by “the Spirit of Christ” (1 Peter 1:11). In other words, great David’s greater Son spoke through David. Christ is the ultimate author of the Psalms. Later, in his earthly life, Jesus would sing and pray the words of David’s Psalms. But he’d already sung and prayed them in and through David, the prophet.<sup>12</sup>

With that in mind, see, for example, Romans 15:3—“For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, *‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’*”—and John 2:17—“His disciples remembered that it was written, *‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’*” Notice how each verse takes Psalm 69 and applies it to Jesus. God sovereignly orchestrated not only the events of David’s life but also the way David spoke of them so that they apply even more fully to Jesus. So, when you are singing or praying a Psalm and see “I” or “me,” think first of Jesus. He’s the primary voice in the Psalter.

Look for (and keep looking to) Jesus, your Priest. Jesus is now the true fulfillment of *the priests* (the mediators between God and humans), *the sacrifices* (the means by which God would forgive and accept humans), and *the temple* (the meeting place between God and humans). See the whole book of Hebrews. When Psalms mention the priests, sacrifices, or temple, think first of Jesus.

Look for (and keep looking to) Jesus, your Prophet. Jesus is also the great song-leader who sings for, with, and through his church (see Hebrews 2:12). So, when you sing “I” or “me,” think first of Christ, then of yourself in Christ, and then of the whole church united to Christ.

#### **4. In view of that, when you sing a Psalm, look also for God’s Kingdom.**

Look for the church—the one church of both old and new covenants. The New Testament says God’s covenant with Abraham was “the gospel beforehand” (Galatians 3:8). It also says that, because *Jesus alone* perfectly kept the covenant, *he alone* inherited all the covenant blessings; now he shares them with everyone united to him—whether Jewish or Gentile: “For all the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in him. That is why it is

through him that we utter our ‘Amen’ to God for his glory” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

This is why the New Testament takes the “we” and “us” of the Psalms and applies them to those who are united to Christ. Look at Romans 8:35–36, for instance—“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, *‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’*” Here the Holy Spirit takes Psalm 44 and applies it to new covenant believers.

So, when you sing words like “we,” “us” “Israel,” the “offspring of Abraham,” the “children of Jacob,” “the tribes of Jacob,” “the house of Levi,” the holy “nation whose God is the LORD,” “Zion,” “Jerusalem,” “the city of God,” “the temple,” “the tent,” “the sanctuary,” “the holy place,” “the house of the LORD,” “the holy land,” “the holy hill” (or mountain), and similar terms, think of the whole Christ—Jesus, the Head, and all believers, his members. Pray in solidarity with your brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those who are persecuted.

##### **5. This reminds you that, when you sing a Psalm, you should also look for the clash of kingdoms.**

Look for the clear contrast and conflict between the church and the world, the godly and the ungodly. The Psalms sharply distinguish right from wrong. They shake us out of the relativism that’s become the very air that we breathe. They won’t let us call evil good and good evil. And they press home its implications. Repeatedly, they remind us that not only do these two ways go in two different directions but also, they end in two very different destinies (see Psalm 1). This contrast permeates the entire book of Psalms. Even Psalm 104, which is all about extolling God the Creator’s ongoing, intricate care over his creation, ends with, “Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the LORD, O my soul! Praise the LORD!” (Psalm 104:35). The Psalms won’t let us ignore the God-centered antithesis between the godly and the ungodly.

On the one hand, some Psalms extol God’s holy and righteous law. On the other hand, some Psalms—the so-called “imprecatory Psalms”—plead

for God to curse his enemies. These Psalms should be used with care, but they should be used. They’re not bitter curses for personal revenge. They’re the King’s pleas for justice and victory over God’s enemies. Both Testaments forbid personal revenge. Not only the New but also the Old insists that vengeance is the Lord’s. If it’s wrong to sing the so-called “imprecatory Psalms” in the new covenant, it would also have been wrong to sing them in the old covenant. In that light, it’s noteworthy that the New Testament quotes “imprecatory Psalms” (like Psalms 69 and 109) and applies them to Jesus and his people (e.g., Acts 1:20; Romans 11:9–10). It’s also noteworthy that the New Testament contains its own “imprecations;” for example, Galatians 1:9—“If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 6:9–10).

All the while, however, bear in mind that, before the final judgment, Christ can destroy his enemies (as enemies) by *grace* as well as by wrath (see Romans 5:6–11). Even in the Old Testament, God sometimes “destroyed” his enemies by making them his friends in amazing grace. For instance, see the book of Jonah. The New Testament intensifies this emphasis.

So, we should at the same time want both to see God’s justice effected and to see all peoples saved. Consider Psalm 83:16—“Fill their faces with shame *so that they will seek your name, O LORD*”—in the context of the whole Psalm. Isn’t it striking that this “imprecatory Psalm” contains an evangelistic plea? Along that line, Psalm 87 predicts that many of God’s enemies who were marked for doom (including Egyptians and Babylonians) will be born again in Zion.

With all this in mind, then, consider too all the prayers, hopes, and invitations in the Psalms for the world and its nations to come in faith to submit to the living and true God. Look, for instance, at Psalms 2, 22, 47, 66, 67, 86, 87, 96, 98, 100, 117, etc. The Triune God who initiated the covenant of grace has always been a missionary God. The severity of the old covenant was never an end in itself but was always a temporary means to a greater end (see Galatians 3:7–4:7). When we sing the Psalms in a