

“Saint Augustine once called the Psalter ‘the Old Testament in microcosm.’ All of the riches of the Scriptures filled in the mine of praise, prophecy, and poetry that is the Psalter. These riches, however, need to be brought to the light of day so they might adorn the life of the Christian. This powerful volume edited by Ray Van Neste and Richard Wells does just that. It brings the wealth of the Psalms to the life of the church: to be sung, read, and practiced. No doubt this is a volume that will be used in colleges and seminaries in courses on the Psalter.”

**Heath A. Thomas**, associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew and director of PhD Studies, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“At a time when the psalms and most of the great hymns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are largely neglected in modern congregational worship, this book is a much needed wake-up call. Wells and Van Neste have edited a collection of excellent essays that remind us of the prominent place the psalms have had for Christians from New Testament times onward. The authors urge us to consider once again the spiritual benefits of focusing on the psalms and give practical guidance for their recovery in church life.”

**Graeme Goldsworthy**, visiting lecturer in Hermeneutics, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia

“This book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the psalms. Its authors bring together many perspectives but are united in their conviction that the rediscovery of the Psalter encourages the ancient practice of living in the psalms, the reclamation of canonical associations, the enrichment of coming into the presence of God with prayer and praise, and the renewal of congregational life. The essays lead the readers in a pilgrimage that takes them from the Old Testament to the New Testament, to the usage and interpretation of the psalms in the early church and the era of the Reformation, and to our modern/postmodern context. The book includes various approaches to the use of the psalms. I expect this volume will encourage many to reassess their own theological, liturgical, and devotional practices.”

**Willem A. VanGemenen**, professor of Old Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“*Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Worship* is a timely expression of timeless truths. Some readers will discover truths they did not know; other readers will remember truths they had almost forgotten; and still others will rejoice that notice has been taken again of how important the psalms are in Christian worship, both public and private. All readers will be revived by this refreshing word about the psalms of the faith. Here is an important book to help us recover the ancient words, still ever new.”

**Michael Travers**, professor of English and senior fellow of the L. Russ Bush Center for Faith and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“While liturgical churches use the psalms regularly, many Baptist, Pentecostal, and other free-church traditions do not. The impressive team of experts in this volume makes the case that the psalms enrich preaching, prayers, singing, and Christian living for every branch of Christianity. This volume is biblically sound and theologically rich, so it is practical to the core. Wells and Van Neste are to be commended for showing new audiences the great value of the Bible’s model songs and prayers.”

**Paul House**, professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University

“A generation ago James Smart wrote a book about the mainline churches titled *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. A generation later, for different reasons, the same has become true in evangelical worship services. This book is a precious resource to help the church recover the invaluable prayers and songs God has given His people to address Him. To an often superficial church that hides its pain, struggle, and doubt on the one hand and fails to see the majesty and greatness of God on the other, *Forgotten Songs* can help churches and individual believers reclaim a strong dose of biblical reality. For future courses I teach on Psalms, this book will be required reading!”

**Stephen G. Dempster**, professor of Religious Studies, Crandall University

“The psalms, John Donne once said, are “the manna of the church.” They provide spiritual nurture throughout the wilderness of life for the people of God, expressing the full range of human hope, despair, confession, praise, and yearning for the living God. This collection of superb essays helps us join our hearts with all the saints through the ages who have found in the inspired words of the Psalter a pathway into the heart of God.”

**Timothy George**, founding dean, Beeson Divinity School  
and general editor, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

“Don’t we wish, pastors, that the mouths of our people were filled with robust prayer? That their homes echoed not only with sounds of television and iPods but with singing to the Lord? That the fullness of their private worship overflowed into our corporate gatherings? That our public worship would in turn enliven their personal devotion? Reading *Forgotten Songs of God* has inspired me to believe it’s possible. I am the reason for this book. Perhaps you are too. If, like me, you have underestimated the value of the psalms in giving your people divine words to sing and pray and in shaping their thoughts and feelings about God and His world, you need this book. The psalms weren’t just for Israel. In Christ they are for the church, waiting to be sung and prayed and preached by a new generation of worshippers. They are waiting to be remembered.”

**David King**, senior pastor, Concord Baptist Church,  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

“For centuries the psalms have been largely neglected in the church with few resources available to recover them. You hold in your hands one of the finest modern manuals assembled to recover the psalms in your local church. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste have called together an all-star cast to instruct us in the biblical use of the psalms and to demonstrate how wisely to put them into practice. Every pastor, music leader, and preparer of the corporate gatherings in the local church must carefully read this book and implement their wise and biblical strategies.”

**Brian Croft**, senior pastor, Auburndale Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky,  
and author, *Visit the Sick, Practical Shepherding*

“Most Christians I know love the book of Psalms: these songs give voice to a wide range of human emotions and also speak to us clearly of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet too often we neglect the psalms in terms of that for which they were originally intended: the corporate praise of the Lord God. This collection of thoughtful, pastoral, and irenic articles is designed to encourage the church once again to think about how to integrate God’s own book of hymns and prayers into the public worship of the church. Highly recommended.”

**Carl R Trueman**, Paul Woolley professor of Church History,  
Westminster Theological Seminary

C. RICHARD WELLS  
& RAY VAN NESTE, EDITORS

# FORGOTTEN SONGS

Reclaiming the Psalms for  
Christian Worship



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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## Chapter 6

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# Delighting in Doctrine

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## WORD AND WORSHIP IN PSALM I

*Ray Ortlund Jr.*

Psalm 1 stands as the introduction to the Psalter. The Psalter itself was the hymnbook of the temple, the content filling Israel's personal and corporate worship. But Psalm 1 rejoices in "the law of the LORD" (v. 2).<sup>1</sup> Such a theme perhaps seems more appropriate to the Pentateuch than the psalms. So why does Psalm 1 stand as the doorway of this book focusing on the worship of God? What does that tell us? It tells us that delighting in God's Word is where true worship begins. It tells us that we step into the worship of God through and according to the Word of God. It tells us that the first filter for guiding and assessing and inspiring our worship of God is the Word of God. It is not as though we are worshipping God only when we are singing, and then listening to the sermon is something else. The whole of a church service from beginning to end is all worship if it is focused on the Word. Christians worship God by singing the Bible, praying the Bible, reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, hearing the Bible, believing the Bible, and obeying the Bible. Psalm 1 defines biblical worship because only the biblical message

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

can lift us to God in worship pleasing to Him. The ministry, as W. B. Sprague articulated it, is “to cure the disorders of the mind,” so that we can follow the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> What could be better suited for this holy purpose than the book of Psalms?

### How Does Psalm 1 Challenge Our Defective Worship?

First, Psalm 1 speaks to our heads, and it also woos our hearts because God wants to free us from the disorders within to worship Him with both head and heart.

Speaking to our heads, Psalm 1 saves us from the idolatry of intellectual self-definition. Self-defining people cannot worship God. They know neither themselves nor Him. The more self-aware they are, the more bluntly they can admit their stalemate in agnosticism. For example, some years ago Arthur Leff gave a lecture at Duke University School of Law entitled “Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law.” He was not a Christian, and he understood where his position led him:

I want to believe—and so do you—in a complete, transcendent and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, *findable* rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe—and so do you—in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves, individually and as a species, what we ought to be. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it.<sup>3</sup>

Leff went on to argue that, since there is no God, the only law we have is our own arbitrary will, and he calls that realization terrifying. He concludes his article this way:

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<sup>2</sup> W. B. Sprague, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Allen Leff, “Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law,” *Duke Law Journal* 1979, no. 6 (1979): 1229–49. Italics his.



It looks as if we are all we have. Given what we know about ourselves and each other, this is an extraordinarily unappetizing prospect; looking around the world, it appears that if all men are brothers, the ruling model is Cain and Abel. Neither reason, nor love, nor even terror, seems to have worked to make us “good,” and worse than that, there is no reason why anything should. . . . As things now stand, everything is up for grabs. . . . God help us.<sup>4</sup>

But God *has* helped us. God loves even the God-dismissing, self-exalting intellectuals, and He has not left us to our own terrifying arbitrariness. Psalm 1 offers us God’s truth for our heads as our first step away from false worship and into the true worship of God. This psalm replaces every form of intellectual idolatry—“the counsel of the wicked”—with the law of the Lord as the only finally convincing and fruitful object of the mind’s meditation. The word *meditates* in Ps 1:2 suggests neither a dreamy religious haze nor an uninvolved intellectual sport but a profoundly personal internalizing of what God says is true. Meditation is human thought at its best, and it is essential to true worship.

Elsewhere the Psalter writes it into our worship that we affirm, “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”” (Pss 14:1; 53:1). The Psalter makes it a part of our worship that we confess, “How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!” (Ps 92:5). Immediately following the lofty assertion that “great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised” (Ps 145:3), the psalmist locates himself within a multigenerational community meditating on the Lord as their intellectual tradition:

One generation shall commend your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.  
On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. (Ps 145:4–5)<sup>5</sup>

Wooing our hearts as well, Psalm 1 saves us from the idolatry of personal self-definition. Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, was asked in an interview, “Are you a Christian?” His answer was, “I am, although

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1249.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ps 78:1–4.

perhaps not in the most traditional sense of the word.”<sup>6</sup> That answer is evasive. Christianity is not custom-made. It stands forth with flinty objectivity, to which we must adjust. Nor should we be surprised or offended by that demand of our faith. We should welcome it as essential to true worship. After all, what would we think of a woman married to the most handsome, wealthy, generous, wise, sacrificial, hilarious, delightful man on the face of the earth, and when he asks her, “Do you love me?” she answers, “Yes, but not in the traditional sense of the word”? Can we deny the integrity of the Bible and the deity of Christ and make allowance for goddess worship, as Dan Brown does, and still say we are Christians in *any* sense of the word? It is manipulative to define the word *Christian* in a self-chosen sense. That way, anyone can call himself a Christian, even if what he believes runs counter to Christ, and the word *Christian* means nothing. But the problem is not words; the problem is the heart. Let’s remember: Judas betrayed Jesus *with a kiss*. But Psalm 1 is here in the Bible, as the doorway into the Psalter and its worship, because God is inviting us to trade in our personal self-definitions for His love in Christ as the defining center of our heart’s worship. The word *blessed* at the heading of Psalm 1 signals how personally enriching true worship is when based in the objective revelation of God. The blessed man of Psalm 1 grows, bears fruit, does not wither, and prospers in a way that will satisfy forever. If we consult our own best and truest interests, we will gladly repent to gain this personal blessedness.

### How Does Psalm 1 Help Us into True Worship?

Psalm 1 bristles with clearly defined contrasts. Indeed, there are no ambiguities here, not because Psalm 1 is simplistic but because it is profound. Psalm 37 qualifies Psalm 1 by acknowledging the prosperity of the wicked. Psalm 37 repeatedly urges us not to fret because of successful evildoers. In this world it often appears that the wrong people are winning. It often appears that Psalm 1 cannot be true with its assurances that the godly prosper in all that they do. Psalm 37 qualifies Psalm 1. It is necessary that our worship take fully into

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.bookreporter.com](http://www.bookreporter.com), 20 March 2003, accessed May 19, 2006.

account the realities of life in this world. But Psalm 37 is Psalm 37, not Psalm 1. It is a footnote to Psalm 1. Psalm 1 comes first, at the introduction to the Psalter, as the primary statement. It boldly declares the existence of a larger moral order towering over the entire human race and all its cultural constructs. If we want to worship God, there is a way, grounded in God's clear revelation. The prosperity of the wicked does not discredit God's way. It is factored into God's way. But the first thing God wants us to know is not the nuanced complexities of this broken world but lucid simplicities of His revealed will. Every detail in Psalm 1 stands out in bold colors. The word *not* appears six times in six verses in the original text, and the word *but* appears three times. The logic embedded in the psalm is unmistakable: "not this but that." Ambiguity does not inspire worship. Demanding clarity can.

Three words in Psalm 1 compel our special attention. First and most obviously, as already observed, *blessed* in verse 1: "*Blessed* is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." What does the word *blessed* say? It is a congratulatory formula. It is a biblical high-five. It is like our exclamation "Bravo!" The same Hebrew root is used in Prov 31:28, where we read, "Her children rise up and *call her blessed*" (italics added). In Ps 1:1, God is saying to this man who knows how to worship, "Way to go!"

What kind of person prompts *God* to stand up and cheer? The worshipper who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers but delights in the law of the Lord. In other words, anyone who desires God enough to ask: "Lord, how do you want me to change? How do you want me to be different?" Verses 1–2 describe the worshipper who *knows* what he believes and what he wants, as well as what he doesn't believe and doesn't want. He has become decisive about it. Whatever other people are saying about him, this man has taken a stand for Christ, and he feels the pleasure of God in his devotion. He is not feeling sorry for himself. He is not thinking about what he has sacrificed. He is thrilled about what he has gained. And God says to this gospel-centered worshipper, "Well done!" The first thing Psalm 1 teaches us is that God is not impossible to please. People can be impossible to please. But through Christ, God is willing to be the head cheerleader of everyone who worships Him according to His Word.

Second, *delight* in verse 2: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD.” That word *delight* both raises and lowers the bar for worship. It raises the bar by reminding us that there is no such thing as moderate Christianity. There is no such thing as halfhearted, play-it-safe, keep-a-low-profile Christianity. The Christian faith is wholehearted because it comes down from a wholehearted God. If anything is obvious about the Bible in general and the Psalter in particular, it is this intense fullness. Marcus Dods paraphrases the divine self-revelation out of which the entire Old Testament flows:

I am the Almighty God, able to fulfill your highest hopes and accomplish for you the brightest ideal that ever my words set before you. There is no need of paring down the promise until it squares with human probabilities, no need of relinquishing one hope it has begotten, no need of adopting some interpretation of it which may make it seem easier to fulfill, and no need of striving to fulfill it in any second-rate way. All possibility lies in this: I am the Almighty God.<sup>7</sup>

Given who He is, “the law of *the LORD*” cannot be a wearying imposition. It must be the object of our highest delight. And if it is, we are worshipping Him in a way that He Himself congratulates.

But the word *delight* also lowers the bar. You do not need a Ph.D. to worship Christ. You only need to enjoy Him. And what has God given us to awaken endless love for Him? Again, the law of the Lord. What is that? The teaching of the Bible. Proverbs 3:1 uses the same word, *torah*, to say, “My son, do not forget my *teaching*” (italics added). Our heavenly Father is a good teacher. And when we become lovingly fascinated with what He teaches in the Bible, we are worshipping Him. This requires repentance. We humble ourselves. We start thinking, *I used to think the Bible wasn't up at my level. Not any more. Now I'm so intrigued by this whole story of God's grace toward people like me, with its wide implications for my entire life. I can't get enough of this book.* People to whom grace has given such delight know how to worship God in a way that pleases Him.

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Dods, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1902), 161.

After all, what is the Bible about? What should we be looking for as we read and memorize and meditate on the Bible? Jesus said that the Scriptures “bear witness about *me*” (John 5:39, italics added). The Bible is not about sin management. It is not even about principles for living the Christian life. The Bible is the story of God making and keeping promises to us sinners. It is the story of God not abandoning us but coming down to us through Christ, though it cost Him His life. It is the story of divine grace for the undeserving, with Jesus as the hero. And seeing Jesus Christ as the key to the plotline of the Bible makes the whole book come alive. Then it is easier to learn how to ransack the Bible as an endless resource for personal and corporate worship. The tree of life in the garden of Eden is Christ. The clothing God gave Adam and Eve is Christ. The ark carrying Noah through the flood of divine judgment is Christ. The goat that took onto itself all the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement is Christ. The brave warrior killing Goliath prefigures Christ, and so forth. The Bible is not like the *Where’s Waldo?* books, with the reader searching and searching to find Waldo in literary landscapes crowded with other figures. Christ is the pervasive theme and focus of the whole Bible. If we read the Bible as the endless display of Christ in His many glories, “the law of the LORD” will never stop activating our worship.

We wish we were living in that deep enjoyment all the time. But the Bible is realistic about our weakness. In Psalm 73 the psalmist admits how his envy of successful unbelievers darkened his experience of God. It nearly cost him his faith. But God did not leave the psalmist there. He renewed his vision of God in the very act of worship (Ps 73:17). In every believing heart God awakens a yearning for Christ that grows into a solid hope. It may at times falter, but it proves durable and fruitful, like the tree in Ps 1:3. There are seasons of both hardship and plenty for real worshippers, but God touches Bible-saturated lives with this rugged grace: “In all that he does, he prospers.” Obviously, those words cannot be construed to mean, “Your life will be a bed of roses.” But they do mean, “God will be faithful to you in the whole of your life.” So, when you are succeeding at work and your company benefits from your performance because you are following God’s Word and not cutting corners and you receive some recognition for it, here is how you can translate that moment into worship: “Thanks. But really, I owe it to God because the

Bible is changing my understanding of everything—not just my religion but even work—and *I'm loving it.*" Let that statement hang awkwardly in midair as you stand there with your embarrassed colleagues in the office while they wonder what to say next.

Third, the word *therefore* in verse 5: "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." That might be the most important word in Psalm 1 because it is the hinge on which the psalm changes focus from temporality to eternity. Verses 1–4 are in the present tense. Then verse 5 fast-forwards into the future, all the way into the eternal state. Verses 1–4 are about how we live now; after the "therefore," verse 5 describes eternity as we shall experience it then. Do you see? Psalm 1 is saying that *delight determines destiny*. It is saying that the reality of human enjoyment is not a private hobby with no significance beyond that; whatever it is that we enjoy reveals the deepest truth about us. It shows what we really worship. And what we worship now we will inherit forever—either chaff driven away by the wind or fruit grown richly by the Spirit.

In the mercy of God, He helps us to align, and realign, with true worship, even in our weakness and sin. The Bible says, "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). When obeying Him is burdensome, we should not blame God. We should repent that we do not love Him more. And when we are so low that we have to worship Him by willpower only and we feel no delighted updraft in His love for us in Christ, then our prayer can be something like this: "Father, You deserve better. You deserve from me the boldly clear worship of Psalm 1. I apologize for this worship I'm offering You now, but it's all I have. Thank You for forgiving my poor, halfhearted worship. Thank You for Christ, the Savior of sinners like me who worship technically but not deeply." Then get back into the Bible. The Spirit of God will use the Word of God to revive your heart, as nothing else can.

If you are weak in worship but nevertheless you are in Christ, be encouraged. God is at work in you, preparing you for eternal greatness: "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6). Right now it is often unclear what people's lives are really worth. But God will make your life's value boldly clear when He fulfills the promise of Psalm 1. In verse 6, for the first time in the psalm, God Himself

is the subject of the verb: “The LORD knows the way of the righteous.” If you want to worship Christ but sometimes you feel unable, the Lord knows you. He understands you. He is involved with you. He has chosen you for Himself, He has inclined you toward Himself, He is calling you to Himself, and His grace will hold onto you forever.

### What Then Is the Message of Psalm 1?

Psalm 1 is about the righteous, the wicked, and worship. It shows that wicked idolaters become righteous worshippers in only one way: when they reject their own self-exaltation and enter gladly into the worship of God as defined by the Word of God. They reject their own formulas for blessedness, and they let God redefine them with the blessedness of Christ. The gospel tells us of only one true Worshipper, who died in the place of idolaters. God is offering, on permanent loan, that Man’s righteousness as our new standing in His presence. The righteous of Psalm 1 are sinners whose evil was nailed to Christ on the cross. No wonder they are worshipping. And they are ready for Psalm 2, Psalm 3, Psalm 4—all the way through the Psalter, to the great hallelujahs of Psalms 146–150, in that perfect temple above.

The message of Psalm 1 is clear. If you want to worship God, shut the distractions out and pick up your Bible. Open it, read it, believe it, meditate on it, delight in it, obey it. God will show you Christ. He will refresh you and help you, from now on into eternity, by the power of grace. It is that simple, that profound.

