

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Reflections on the Psalms

by
C. S. Lewis

QUESTIONS

1. “Most emphatically,” writes C. S. Lewis, “the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry” (p. 3). Do you think of the Psalms primarily as poetry? Why or why not?
2. “[The psalms’] chief formal characteristic, the most obvious element of pattern, is fortunately one that survives in translation. Most readers will know that I mean what the scholars call ‘parallelism’” (p. 4). How does Lewis define the parallelism that we find in the Psalms?

Can you think of any verses on your own that display this literary element?

3. “A man can’t be always defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it” (p. 8). How often do you take time to “feed on [truth]”—whether in prayer, reflection, or study? How could you be more intentional about doing so?
4. According to Lewis, for the psalmist, “Judgement is apparently an occasion of universal rejoicing” (p. 12). Why does Lewis believe that the psalmist views judgment in this way? What do you make of his answer?
5. When faced with the “terrible” or “contemptible” psalms, have you ever been tempted to “leave them alone” (p. 25)? What makes these psalms so challenging? What can you learn from how Lewis approaches them?
6. “It is even arguable,” Lewis notes, “that the moment ‘Heaven’ ceases to mean union with God and ‘Hell’ to mean separation from Him, the belief in either is a mischievous superstition” (p. 47). Why does Lewis bring this up in a chapter about death in the Psalms? What point is he trying to make?
7. “[The psalmists] long to live all their days in the Temple so that they may constantly see ‘the fair beauty of the Lord’ (27:4)” (p. 58). Do you long to see “the fair beauty of the Lord”? Why or why not? How might the Psalms help foster that longing within you?

8. “More to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb’ (19:10). One can well understand this being said of God’s mercies, God’s visitations, His attributes. But what the poet is actually talking about is God’s law, His commands; His ‘rulings’” (pp. 63–64). When you think about “God’s law, His commands; His ‘rulings,’” what images or associations come to mind? Why is that?
9. “It is foolish,” Lewis writes, “to read such passages without realising that a quite genuine problem is involved. And I am not at all confident about the solution” (p. 78). What is the “problem” Lewis is identifying here? How does his honesty about not knowing a “solution” strike you? Do you ever feel that way about Psalms in particular or the Bible in general?
10. According to Lewis, “the Jews, like nearly all the ancients, were agricultural and approached Nature with a gardener’s and a farmer’s interest, concerned with rain, with grass ‘for the service of man,’ wine to cheer man up, and olive-oil to make his face shine” (p. 97). Before reading this book, had you ever considered the agricultural context from which the Jews of this time were writing? How might considering this impact how you read the Psalms?
11. “When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for some time after it had been given to me, I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should ‘praise’ God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself

demanded it” (p. 105). How do you feel when you are told in the Bible or by others to “praise” God? Why do you feel that way?

12. “It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is” (p. 111). What do you make of these two metaphors Lewis offers about the nature of praising God? How might they help you think differently about how and why you praise God?
13. “[The Psalms] have been believed to contain a second or hidden meaning, an ‘allegorical’ sense, concerned with the central truths of Christianity. . . . Such a doctrine, not without reason, arouses deep distrust in a modern mind” (p. 115). What benefits does looking in the Psalms for “a second or hidden meaning” bring to our interpretation? What dangers does it bring?
14. In chapter XII, Lewis defends the existence of “second meanings” in scripture on two grounds. What are they? Did you find one more persuasive than the other? Why or why not?
15. “Two figures meet us in the Psalms,” notes Lewis, “that of the sufferer and that of the conquering and liberating king. . . . Our Lord identified Himself with both these characters” (p. 142). When you think of Jesus, which of these two characters do you think of first? What do these two characters reveal to us about the person and meaning of Jesus?

16. “What we see when we think we are looking into the depths of Scripture may sometimes be only the reflection of our own silly faces” (p. 142). Can you think of an example of this all-too-common phenomenon of biblical interpretation? Do you have any examples from your own reading of scripture?
17. What have you learned about the Psalms from this book? How will this book impact how you view and use the Psalms from now on?