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– David Stroud – *Newfrontiers and ChristChurch London*

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You can also receive daily messages from Phil Moore on Twitter by following **@PhilMooreLondon**.

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Psalms

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

Phil Moore

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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*This book is for the people of
Everyday Church, London.
Let's be the kind of church together
which is music to God's ears.*

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About the *Straight to the Heart* Series

On his eightieth birthday, Sir Winston Churchill dismissed the compliment that he was the “lion” who had defeated Nazi Germany in World War Two. He told the Houses of Parliament that *“It was a nation and race dwelling all around the globe that had the lion’s heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”*

I hope that God speaks to you very powerfully through the “roar” of the books in the *Straight to the Heart* series. I hope they help you to understand the books of the Bible and the message which the Holy Spirit inspired their authors to write. I hope that they help you to hear God’s voice challenging you, and that they provide you with a springboard for further journeys into each book of Scripture for yourself.

But when you hear my “roar”, I want you to know that it comes from the heart of a much bigger “lion” than me. I have been shaped by a whole host of great Christian thinkers and preachers from around the world, and I want to give due credit to at least some of them here:

Terry Virgo, David Stroud, Dave Holden, John Hosier, Adrian Holloway, Greg Haslam, Lex Loizides and all those who lead the Newfrontiers family of churches. Friends and encouragers, such as Stef Liston, Joel Virgo, Stuart Gibbs, Scott Taylor, Nick Sharp, Nick Derbridge, Phil Whittall, and Kevin and Sarah Aires. Tony Collins, Jenny Ward and Simon Cox at Monarch Books. Malcolm Kayes and all the elders of The Coign Church, Woking.

My fellow elders and church members here at Everyday Church in Southwest London. My great friend Andrew Wilson – without your friendship, encouragement and example, this series would never have happened.

I would like to thank my parents, my brother Jonathan, and my in-laws, Clive and Sue Jackson. Dad – your example birthed in my heart the passion which brought this series into being. I didn't listen to all you said when I was a child, but I couldn't ignore the way you got up at five o' clock every morning to pray, read the Bible and worship, because of your radical love for God and for his Word. I'd like to thank my children – Isaac, Noah, Esther and Ethan – for keeping me sane when publishing deadlines were looming. But most of all, I'm grateful to my incredible wife, Ruth – my friend, encourager, corrector and helper.

You all have the lion's heart, and you have all developed the lion's heart in me. I count it an enormous privilege to be the one who was chosen to sound the lion's roar.

So welcome to the *Straight to the Heart* series. My prayer is that you will let this roar grip your own heart too – for the glory of the great Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Introduction: Music to God's Ears

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for
the upright to praise him.*

(Psalm 33:1)

God wants to grab your attention. He could hardly have made it any clearer. He made Psalms the central book of the Bible. He made it contain the Bible's middle chapter and middle verse.¹ He made it by far the longest book of the Bible, with more than twice as many chapters as the next longest book. He made it contain the longest chapter in the Bible and then, for effect, he made it home to the shortest chapter too.² He inspired the writers of the New Testament to quote more from Psalms than from any other book in the Old Testament – at least seventy-five times directly and many more times indirectly. So don't miss the many ways that God is shouting for your attention. He has something vitally important to teach you through the book of Psalms.

Psalms is a book which shows us how to relate to God. The fourth-century writer Athanasius observed that this book is unique because, while the rest of the Bible speaks *to* us, Psalms speaks *for* us.³ It teaches us how to relate to God as friends, which is why no other book in human history has been as loved, valued and memorized by so many people from so many different

¹ The middle chapter of the Bible is Psalm 117. The middle verse is Psalm 103:1.

² The longest chapter of the Bible is Psalm 119. The shortest is Psalm 117.

³ He wrote this in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Meaning of the Psalms* in about 370 AD.

nations. The American president John Adams spoke for millions when he told Thomas Jefferson that *"The Psalms of David, in sublimity, beauty, pathos, and originality, or in one word poetry, are superior to all the odes, hymns, and songs in any language."*⁴ God gave us these 150 worship songs because he wants to teach us how to pray the kind of prayers which are music to his ears.

Psalms makes it clear that God wants us to sing to him. Spiritual discussions and resolutions have their value, but they can never substitute for building a relationship with God through singing simple love songs. One of my friends discovered this when he started coming to some of the meetings at the church I lead. As a typically reserved Englishman, he was so appalled by our worship that he went home and googled *"churches without singing"*. Thankfully, he couldn't find any, because he later shared at his baptism that it was the sight of hundreds of people singing out their love for God which melted his heart and turned him into a passionate worshipper too.

The Hebrews called Psalms *tehillim*, which means *songs of praise*. The Greeks called it *psalmoi*, which means *songs*, and it is from this that we get our own name for this collection. In case we forget that a relationship with God always involves singing, Psalms tells us that God wants us to worship him *"with stringed instruments"* and on the *"trumpet... harp and lyre... strings and pipe... with resounding cymbals"*.⁵ Shortly after he triggered the greatest Christian revival Europe has ever seen, Martin Luther told his converts that *"Music is a gift and grace of God, not an invention of men. Thus it drives out the devil... I would allow no man to preach or teach God's people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song."*⁶ We discover this as we read the book of Psalms.

⁴ This quote comes from David McCullough's biography, simply entitled *John Adams* (2001).

⁵ See the titles of Psalms 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67 and 76. See also Psalms 33:1-3, 92:1-3, 144:9 and 150:3-5.

⁶ Quoted by Kenneth W. Osbeck in *"101 Hymn Stories"* (1982).

But don't imagine that Psalms is like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, shutting her eyes to reality by singing about a few of her favourite things. The psalms teach us how to relate to God in the bad times, in the dark times and in times so confusing that we want to throw in the towel on our faith altogether. The psalmists are shockingly honest with God about how they feel, because life isn't always easy. They teach us to sing the blues as well as happy songs because how we worship in the difficult times is just as much music to God's ears. The Christian writer Eugene Peterson confesses that without Psalms he would not know how to keep on worshipping at all:

I need a language that is large enough to maintain continuities, supple enough to express nuances across a lifetime that brackets child and adult experiences, and courageous enough to explore all the countries of sin and salvation, mercy and grace, creation and covenant, anxiety and trust, unbelief and faith that comprise the continental human condition... Where will we acquire a language that is adequate for these intensities? Where else but in the Psalms? For men and women who are called to leadership in the community of faith, apprenticeship in the Psalms is not an option; it is a mandate.⁷

Psalms took almost 1,000 years to write – far longer than any other book in the Bible. Moses wrote Psalm 90 in about 1410 BC and Psalm 137 appears to have been written in about 530 BC. Some time after that, God inspired some of the worship leaders at the Temple in Jerusalem⁸ to compile a collection of 150 of the best psalms from the several thousand which were then in

⁷ Eugene Peterson in *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (1987).

⁸ 1 Chronicles 25:1–6 indicates that some these temple worship leaders were *prophets* and *seers*. They probably divided Psalms into five books in order to mirror the five books of the Jewish Torah.

circulation.⁹ Some of the psalms they collated were already part of mini-collections,¹⁰ but God inspired them to gather them into the five books which make up Psalms in order to teach us how to pray and worship.

Book I comprises **Psalms 1–41** and it focuses on the character of God in order to teach us how to **sing about who God is**. Book II comprises **Psalms 42–72** and it teaches us how to **sing when times are hard**. Book III comprises **Psalms 73–89** and it models how God wants you to **sing out how you really feel**. Book IV comprises **Psalms 90–106** and it charts the history of God’s dealings with the human race so that we can learn to **sing about God’s plan**. Book V comprises **Psalms 107–150** and it ends the book of Psalms with a call for you to **sing your response to God**.

It’s very tempting to ignore the way that the Temple worship leaders structured Psalms and to study its contents by theme, but I am convinced that this structure is our God-given commentary on the meaning of these worship songs. Throughout this book we will therefore resist the urge to pluck a few favourite verses out of context, looking instead at each psalm or cluster of psalms as a unit which teaches us a particular lesson about how we are to worship God. As we do so, we will learn how we can get to know God deeply as our friend, as did the writers of the psalms.

Make no mistake about it: God wants to grab your attention. He wants to teach you how to grow in a relationship with him. He wants to teach you how to sing the kind of worship songs which have always been, in every generation, sweet music to God’s ears.

⁹ There are many psalms in Scripture which were not included in the book of Psalms: see Exodus 15:1–21, Deuteronomy 31:30–32:47, Judges 5:1–31, 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and Isaiah 38:9–20. Similarly, 1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs, but only two of them were included as Psalms 72 and 127.

¹⁰ We can still see the names of these mini-collections in the titles of some psalms, for example, the “songs of ascents”. Psalm 72:20 must have been the end of a mini-collection, since many more psalms of David follow.

Book I – Psalms 1–41:

Sing About Who
God Is

The King of Kings (1:1–2:12)

I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.

(Psalm 2:6)

If you want to understand Psalms 1 and 2, you only need four words: *anyone, Solomon, Jesus, us*. There you have it. That's the meaning of the first two psalms in just four words.

Psalm 1:1–6 is about *anyone*. It acts as a preface to the entire book of Psalms by calling each of us to make an up-front choice between righteousness and wickedness, between listening to God's Word or to the world, between living for ourselves or pursuing friendship with God. It begins by promising that *blessed or happy* is anyone who delights in God's Word and who studies it day and night.¹ It promises that if we plant ourselves in a place where we can deepen our relationship with God, we will drink from the non-stop stream of blessings which flows from his throne. It's significant that the first word of Psalms is "*happy*". This book holds the key to our enjoying the deeply fulfilling friendship with God for which we were created.²

But this first psalm also warns us that anyone can be deceived into missing God's purpose for their life. The drift is often gradual, since 1:1 reminds us that *walking* with sinners easily becomes *standing* with sinners and eventually *sitting*

¹ The word used for *law* twice in 1:2 is *tōrāh*, which means literally *instruction* and was used to refer to the five books of Moses' *Law*. It later came to refer to the Old Testament as a whole.

² Note the deliberate similarity between 1:3 and Genesis 2:10–14 and Revelation 22:1–2. See also Jeremiah 17:7–8.

with sinners. It is often unnoticed, since those who turn away from God often think that they are still part of “*the assembly of the righteous*.”³ Psalms isn’t just a collection of pretty choruses; it demands that we make an active decision from the outset. It warns us that, unless we meditate on the words of this book and apply them, God will sweep us away like dust before the scorching wind. Psalm 2 was deliberately placed after Psalm 1 because the same Hebrew word *hāgāh* is used for the nations *plotting* to cast off God’s rule in 2:1 as is used for the righteous *meditating* on his Word in 1:2.⁴ Psalm 2:1–3 therefore tells us that many people will despise the happiness described in Psalm 1 and will choose to view God’s commands as *chains* and *shackles* which restrict them from having a good time. Ancient kings and rulers or modern media and social networking unite the human race in trying to throw off the rule of God and of his Messiah.⁵

Psalm 2:4–9 is therefore about *Solomon*. Even though these two psalms are untitled, we can tell from Acts 4:25 that David wrote them after God promised him in 2 Samuel 7 that “*I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood... I will be his father, and he will be my son... Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.*” David wrote this psalm for Solomon’s coronation to rejoice that his wise son had chosen the righteous life described in Psalm 1 and that no foreign ruler would be able

³ The Hebrew words *ēdāh* and *qāhāl* are used repeatedly in Psalms to describe the *congregation* or *assembly* of Israel. The normal Greek word used to translate them is *ekklesiā*, the word which Jesus chose for the *Church*. “*The wicked*” and “*the righteous*” are referred to in the plural because true believers always gather together.

⁴ Another big clue that these two psalms belong together can be found in the way that the phrase “*Blessed is anyone*” acts as bookends in 1:1 and 2:12.

⁵ The word for *anointed one* in Hebrew is *messiah*. The Old Testament uses this word to describe Saul, David and Solomon as the anointed kings of Israel. See for example 1 Samuel 16:6 and 24:6.

to his resist his righteous reign.⁶ “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain,” he hears God saying. “You are my son; today I have become your father.”⁷

If you know anything about Solomon’s reign, you will grasp why Psalm 2:4–9 is also about *Jesus*. Solomon proved to be one of Israel’s greatest failures, because even the best of men are only men at best. He was enticed by his pagan wives into walking, standing and sitting in their pagan temples. Within five years of his death, Israel was torn apart and an invading Egyptian army succeeded in plundering Jerusalem.⁸ Solomon was not the true Messiah that God’s People needed. He was simply a picture of a greater descendant of David who was yet to come.

The early Christians understood this. They prayed this psalm back to God in Acts 4:23–31 and asked him to give the nations of the earth to “*your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed*”. John quotes from this psalm in Revelation 19:11–16 in order to tell us that Jesus rules with an iron sceptre and that he laughs at human rebellion because he is “*King of kings and Lord of lords*”. Paul quotes from this psalm in Acts 13:33 to tell us that God the Father declared to the world that Jesus is his Son by raising him from the dead.⁹ We have failed to live the righteous life which is described in Psalm 1, so God sent Jesus to live it for us and to establish a Kingdom of those who want to choose afresh to pursue relationship with God.

That’s why Psalm 2:10–12 is about *us*. Note the way in which the final sentence of Psalm 2 follows the same

⁶ David made Solomon king in a hurry due to a conspiracy in 1 Kings 1, but his use of the word *gōyīm* indicates that his primary concern was the resurgence of the hostile *pagan nations* which he had conquered.

⁷ David normally refers to Jerusalem as *Zion* because this was the hill in the city where he had constructed God’s Tabernacle and his own royal palace. This is what made Zion God’s “*holy mountain*”.

⁸ 1 Kings 12:16–19; 14:25–26.

⁹ Psalm 2 is quoted a massive seven times in the New Testament (Acts 4:25–26; 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5; Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15). Jesus did not so much *become* God’s Son as *become revealed* as God’s Son.

construction as the first sentence of Psalm 1. David repeats that *blessed* or *happy* is anyone who takes refuge in God's Messiah as their Saviour because only he can equip them to live the righteous life which God requires. Note that it is also the same construction which Jesus used in his Beatitudes in Matthew 5 to tell us that "*Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... Blessed are the pure in heart.*" Jesus came to turn us from the path of destruction and to become our refuge from God's judgment. He calls us to find true happiness by discovering the deep friendship with God for which we were originally created.¹⁰

So can you see why God placed these two psalms together? Can you see what God is saying through these two chapters as a whole? Both psalms lay out a choice between happiness and destruction. Both psalms call us to live fruitful lives as friends of God. They tell us that Jesus is King of kings, that he laughs at human rebellion, and that he invites us to rule as "*kings and priests*" with him.¹¹ In case we miss this, he quotes from Psalm 2:9 in Revelation 2:27 and promises that we have authority to extend his rule over the nations. He makes us co-heirs with him to the Father's promise in 2:8: "*Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.*"

Anyone, Solomon, Jesus, us. Psalms 1 and 2 belong together and can be summed up in four simple words, but their message is life-changingly profound. They call us to pour out the rest of our lives in submission to God's Word and to his Messiah. They call us to make an up-front choice to take the path to true happiness. They call us to surrender our lives to Jesus, the glorious King of kings.

¹⁰ The NIV translation of 2:12 can be unhelpful since Exodus 34:6 makes it clear that David is not saying God is easily angered. He is telling us that Jesus is our only refuge *when God's anger flares up even a little.*

¹¹ This is the way that the simplest Greek manuscripts express Revelation 5:10.