

LEARNING TO LOVE
THE PSALMS

W. ROBERT GODFREY

ENDORSEMENTS

“The Psalms join the hearts of believers to the heart of their King as together they pant after the glory of God. As a scholar who loves the psalms, Dr. Godfrey offers a very helpful introduction to reading the Psalter and short reflections on selected psalms that convey the spirit of childlike faith. In a time when biblical studies are dominated by technical scholarship, here we have a simply written, deeply personal, and yet profoundly insightful book on the part of the Bible that Calvin rightly called ‘an anatomy of all parts of the soul.’ Read this book prayerfully and be spiritually refreshed, challenged, and fed.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“*Learning to Love the Psalms* reflects a lifetime of mediation on and love for the Psalter. Dr. Godfrey has demonstrated a deep and sustained engagement with the text, and he shows how these Psalms repeatedly point us to Christ the King without losing sight of how they also encourage us to pursue godly living.”

—DR. BRYAN ESTELLE

Professor of Old Testament
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

“Almost without our noticing it, a single generation of Christian leaders has managed to eliminate the constant use of the prayer and hymn book of the Savior and the first eighteen centuries of the church. Here, Bob Godfrey prescribes medicine to reverse our sickness and provide a tonic for our spiritual weakness. And this medicine tastes good! By sharing his own love for the Psalms in a way that is both instructive and infectious, he makes us want to know them better—and to discover

(and express in worship) the full emotional range of the Christian life. *Learning to Love the Psalms* is *the* ideal book for students in college or seminary, for musicians and pastors, and indeed for Christians of every shape and size. May it help to produce a new era of love for the Psalms!”

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

Teaching fellow
Ligonier Ministries

“My appreciation for the Psalter has grown over the years, largely through the influence of two teachers: John Calvin and Robert Godfrey. An aficionado of great writing, Dr. Godfrey often discovers details the rest of us miss. When we’re talking about the Word of God, that is a singular gift. I can’t wait to read every page of this with my family.”

—DR. MICHAEL S. HORTON

J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics
Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, Calif.

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Chapter 1



THE ATTRACTION OF THE PSALMS

At a recent conference, I was asked what my favorite book of the Bible is. My initial reaction was to wonder if that was a bad question. Should we not like all of the Word of God equally? Then I thought that I should cooperate, and I asked myself what book I most often turn to and enjoy. I realized that the answer was easy. In recent years, that book has been the book of Psalms.

I was converted to Christ as a junior in high school through the ministry of a church that primarily sang the Psalms. So, for many years, I have lived with the Psalms and have come to know some things about them. But only in recent years have I found them profoundly engaging and fascinating. These years have been a time of delightful discovery for me—a delight that I hope to communicate in this book.

Several features of the Psalms have been especially attractive to me. The first is the beauty of the language and the poetic expression of the great truths of the faith. Consider the simple words, “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1). How much comfort they have brought to many, many souls in distress. Or think of the promises of God’s redemption in Psalm 103: “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,

who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (vv. 2–5). Or ponder the poignant picture of God's remembrance of our suffering: "Put thou my tears into thy bottle" (Ps. 56:8 KJV).

The second attraction is the discovery that the more you dig into the Psalter, the more you discover. Like all great poetry, the Psalms are like a mine with ever new depths to reach and ever more gold to find. They reward abundantly whatever effort we make to know them better.

Third, there are psalms for all occasions. The Psalms do not, to be sure, make explicit reference to all the occasions for which there are Hallmark cards. But they do mark all the important spiritual moments and emotions in the lives of the people of God. As John Calvin said, "I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, 'An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;' for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."¹ The Psalms teach us how to express our emotions to God in all the circumstances of our lives.

Fourth, the Psalms are full of Christ. They not only explicitly prophesy the coming of Christ (e.g., Pss. 2; 22; 110), but the message of the Psalms always pulls the soul to Christ and His great saving work. As was said in the ancient church, "Always a psalm in the mouth, always Christ in the heart" (*semper in ore psalmus, semper in corde Christus*). The Psalms intensify our fellowship with Christ.

What I have found in the Psalms has been well known to many in the history of the church. Throughout history, the book of Psalms has been treasured by many Christians in many places. In the ancient and medieval periods, the Psalms were studied and sung very frequently, especially by monastics. The great Athanasius (296–373) said, "I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms; for they embrace the whole life of man, the affections of his mind, and the motions of his soul. To praise and glorify God, he can select a psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979), vol. 1, xxxvi–xxxvii.

him.”² In the Reformation, the recovery of the Bible for all in the church meant also a recovery of the Psalms. Luther had learned the Psalms early as a monk and continued to love them. He called the Psalter “a little Bible,” saying, “The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ’s death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.”³ Among the Reformed, the Psalms were versified and sung as the songbook of the church. Those early Calvinists delighted to be able to take the words of God on their lips to praise Him. John Calvin, who supervised the versification of the whole Psalter for singing, expressed his enthusiasm for the Psalms in these words: “As calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise [of prayer] cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine.”⁴

The followers of Calvin shared his conviction about the value. We can see that clearly, for example, in the experience of the French Calvinists known as Huguenots. As Bernard Cottret wrote, “The psalter was the French Reformation.”⁵ Those French Protestants of the mid-sixteenth century loved the Psalms and sang them eagerly, even on their way to die as martyrs. The French Huguenots found in their metrical version of the Psalms songs that “lent Calvin’s piety poetic power.”⁶ These poetic translations of the Psalms for singing in the sixteenth century helped the church again to see the power and relevance of the Psalter.

The Psalms were, however, more than inspiration and comfort for Reformed Christians. The Psalms were more even than a way to express

2 Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 1980), 94.

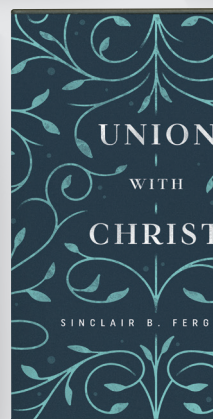
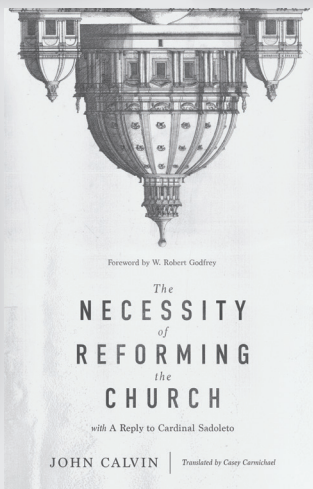
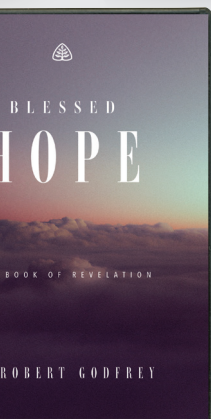
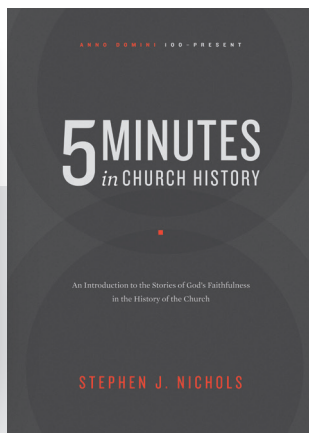
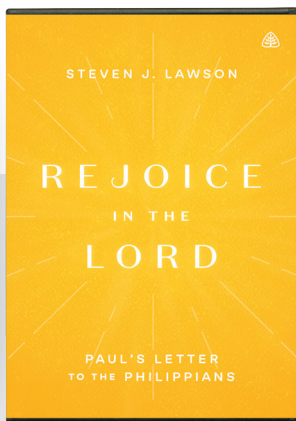
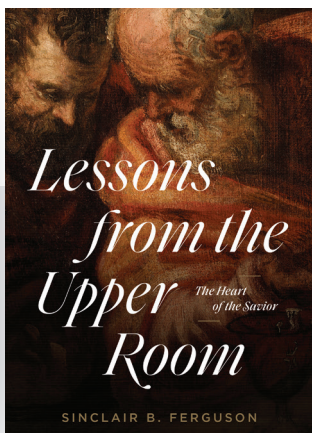
3 Bushell, 93.

4 Calvin, xxxvii.

5 Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 172.

6 Heiko Oberman, “*Initia Calvini*,” in Wilhelm Neuser, ed., *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994), 113n1.

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