

»Table of Contents »Index  
»Permissions

## Special Section: Surprised By The Psalms

### How To Read The Psalms

#### Nine Principles To Enrich Your Understanding

By Tremper Longman III



Illustration by Suzy Schultz

Christians love to read the psalms and rightly so. But while Psalms may be the most popular book of the Bible, the psalms are often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many of us choose a few favorites and ignore other psalms that strike us as bizarre or even cruel. Yet all the psalms were written for our benefit. To understand and appreciate the whole collection, we need solid principles of interpretation that will guide us to a proper reading and application of this riveting book.

There are nine principles that we should keep in mind as we read the psalms. Not only will they help us understand God's message in the psalms, but these principles will also allow us to see them in all their richness. As we meditate on the psalms we will think, feel, imagine, and choose in increasingly godly ways.

In order to illustrate each of these principles, I will apply them to Psalm 131:

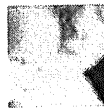


Illustration by Suzy Schultz

*A song for the ascent to Jerusalem. A psalm of David.*

1. LORD, my heart is not proud;

- my eyes are not haughty.  
I don't concern myself with matters too great  
or awesome for me.
2. But I have stilled and quieted myself,  
just as a small child is quiet with its mother.  
Yes, like a small child is my soul within me.
  3. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD—  
now and always. (NLT)



Illustration by Suzy Schultz

### **Principle 1:**

Read a psalm in its context.

This first principle, of course, is fundamental for reading any passage of Scripture. However, we must take into account the special nature of the book of Psalms as we apply the principle there.

The psalms are unique in the Bible. Psalms is an anthology of 150 separate poetic compositions, not a narrative like Genesis or Mark nor a collection of prophetic oracles like Isaiah.

Through the ages, attempts have been made to give a rationale for why one psalm follows another. Occasionally, you can see small collections of similar poems grouped together, for instance the “songs of ascents” (Psalm 120–134) where Psalm 131 is found. But context does not mean the same thing in Psalms as it does in other biblical books:

A psalm may have no relationship to the ones that surround it.

Clearly, it is important to read a portion of a psalm in light of the whole poem. However, if you are reading a poem like Psalm 131 in its entirety, a different type of context takes on a very important role. So important, indeed, that we will assign it a separate principle as follows.

### **Principle 2:**

Determine the genre of the psalm you are reading.

Every psalm is unique. No two psalms are exactly alike. Nonetheless, the 150 psalms fall into some basic patterns, reflecting how they were used in their original setting. Psalm 131 is a psalm of confidence (see “The Types of Psalms,” p. 45).

As you reread Psalm 131, note that it evokes a feeling of calm trust in God. Psalm 131 uses one vivid metaphor, the picture of a quiet child in the arms of its mother, to communicate its message.

### **Principle 3:**

Meditate on the parallelism of the psalm.

Open to any psalm, indeed any poem in the Bible, and you will discover an echoing effect between the lines. The words are rarely exactly the same, but they are often obviously related in meaning, as for instance in Psalm 2:2:

The kings of the earth prepare for battle;  
the rulers plot together  
against the LORD  
and against his anointed one. (*NLT*)

“Kings” in the first line parallels “rulers” in the second. “Prepare for battle” in the first is echoed by “plot together” in the second. The third and fourth lines are both prepositional phrases naming the objects of the human rulers’ attack.

Many wrongly understand this phenomenon, called parallelism, to be merely ornamental. “The poet is saying the same thing twice, just using different words.”

On the contrary, the second line of a parallelism, while showing a strong similarity with the first, always carries forward the thought of the first line. It is not A (the first line) equals B, but A, and what’s more B.

How does this apply to Psalm 131:1?

The psalmist (in the A line) distances himself from pride by asserting that his heart is not proud. In the language of the Old Testament, the heart is the center of one’s personality. It is a metaphor for what makes a person tick. The psalmist is saying that at the core of his being he is without pride. The next two parallel lines flow from this one. In the B line (“my eyes are not haughty”), the psalmist claims that his demeanor is not proud. As people look at him, they see a humble person. Then in the third line (Psalm 131:1 is a three-part parallelism), the psalmist says that he does not reach beyond himself in how he acts. Indeed, he distances himself from pride in his actions by first saying that he “does not concern himself with matters too great” and then saying it more strongly by denying participation in acts “too awesome for me.”

#### **Principle 4:**

Unpack the imagery of the psalm.

Parallelism and imagery are the two most notable characteristics of biblical poetry. In both cases, we see that we need to reflect more carefully and slowly on poetry than prose, because poetry is compressed language. It says a lot using only a few words.

Not only do we need to ask about the relationship between the lines (parallelism), we must be on the lookout for the metaphors and similes that give such imaginative power to the psalms.

Psalm 131:2 provides a striking instance of an image that needs to be unpacked. The psalmist tells us that he has calmed himself “just as a small child is quiet with its mother.”

Reflecting on the significance of this image, we note that the psalmist is presenting us with a picture of God as our caring and compassionate mother. The psalmist’s soul rests as calmly in God’s loving arms as a “small child” rests in its mother’s, presenting the reader with a heartfelt picture of trust and confidence.

#### **Principle 5:**

Read the psalm in light of the title.

The title of a psalm provides a wealth of information (authorship, worship setting, musical terms, historical situation, and so on), but we often overlook it. English translations don’t even assign the title a verse number, making ambiguous its status as Scripture. However, the title is

verse 1 and definitely a part of the canon as passed down from Old Testament times.

Nonetheless, we must apply this principle with care. The titles sometimes give us information about such things as the historical setting that inspired the writing of the psalm in the first place (see Psalm 3 and Psalm 51 as examples), but the psalm itself purposefully distances itself from that historical setting. It never mentions specific names and events, and for a very important reason. The psalms were written in order to be used in the regular worship of the Old Testament people of God. We will explore this further under Principle 9, but for now know that the psalms are intentionally non-specific in terms of their original historical background.

The title of Psalm 131 provides us with two interesting bits of information. The psalm is a “song of ascents.” The New Living Translation is almost certainly correct when it says that these psalms are songs “for the ascent to Jerusalem.” That is, they were sung by worshipers as they left their country towns and made the trip to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the major festivals such as Passover. We can picture the families making the long walk, and perhaps the psalmist was inspired in his image of confidence by seeing mothers carrying their calm, sleeping children.

We are also told that David authored the psalm. This is an intriguing bit of information that can help us to understand the psalm.

### **Principle 6:**

Glean the theological teaching of the psalm.

The psalms teach us about God and our relationship with Him; that is the heart of theology. The Psalter may be thought of as a portrait gallery of God, presenting us with multiple images of who God is. These images are most often pictures of relationship. God is our shepherd (Psalm 23); our warrior (Psalm 18); our king (Psalm 47); and in the case of Psalm 131, a mother who cares for us, protects us, and calms our anxious souls.

The psalms use imagery to communicate God because imagery reveals Him to us by comparing Him to things and people in our experience. But images reveal Him in a way that does not compromise His mystery. We are not presented with a carefully precise prose description of the nature of God, but rather with metaphors, through which we learn truly but not comprehensively. God is high above our thoughts, but He kindly gives us glimpses of His nature through imagery.

### **Principle 7:**

Ask how the psalm anticipates Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave the disciples a principle that should govern our reading of the whole Old Testament. He told them that His suffering and glorification were anticipated in “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).

While the New Testament shows us that a handful of psalms are especially relevant to the coming of Christ (Psalm 2; Psalm 16; Psalm 22; Psalm 69; Psalm 110, for example), we should read every single psalm with Christ in mind.

As we pray the psalms, for instance, we can pray them as prayers to Jesus. Psalm 131 is a prayer of confidence to God. How much more confidence should we have now that the Israelite’s hope of a messiah has actually come? We should pray Psalm 131 with Christ in mind.

We should also think of the psalms as prayers of Jesus. After all, He sang them (Hebrews 2:12). During His earthly ministry, He often quoted them (see Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm

22:1). Indeed, we can say that only Jesus could sing Psalm 131, an expression of absolute trust and humility, at all times of His life and with perfect integrity. Not even David could do that. I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36–46) struggling with the will of God for His life, but stilling and quieting His soul before His journey to the cross.

The whole Old Testament, the psalms included, anticipate Christ. Ask yourself how the psalm you are reading leads you to Christ.

### **Principle 8:**

Consider the psalm a mirror of your soul.

The psalms are a mirror of our souls. When I get up in the morning, I drag myself to the mirror. As I force my eyes open, I gasp. I then quickly throw water in my face, shave, and comb my hair. A mirror, you see, gives me a close look at my physical appearance.

Psalms also give me a good look at myself, but they peer deeper than a glass mirror; they reveal my soul.

The psalms express every emotion that human beings experience. The laments articulate our fear, despair, shame, and anger. The hymns express joy, love, and confidence. As we read the words of the psalmist, they become our own. They help us understand what is going on inside of us. But even more, they minister to us as they direct us toward God.

Before a job interview, Brad opened his Bible and read Psalm 131. “I have stilled and quieted myself” (Psalm 131:2, NLT). Brad felt his own anxiety with a new level of awareness. I am far from calm, he thought to himself. As he read on, the psalmist pointed him in the only direction where he could find some relief from the churning in the pit of his stomach: “Put your hope in the LORD—now and always” (Psalm 131:3, NLT).

### **Principle 9:**

Let the psalm guide your life.

Brad’s comfort came from the concluding verse of Psalm 131. It is an imperative, a command to God’s people based on the psalmist’s example of humility and confidence in God.

The psalms do more than teach us about God by stimulating our imagination. They do more than guide our emotional lives. They lead us to godly actions and attitudes.

Preeminently, the psalms, as the hymnbook of ancient Israel, tell us how to worship. They encourage us to sing, praise, clap our hands, pray, fall on our knees. They invite us to an enthusiastic adoration of our God in good times and in difficult times.

These principles can help us as we seek to understand and apply the psalms to our lives. They are not a magical formula, however. We must approach the psalms with the understanding that we will meet our God there.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Anatomy Lesson*

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: The Types Of Psalms*

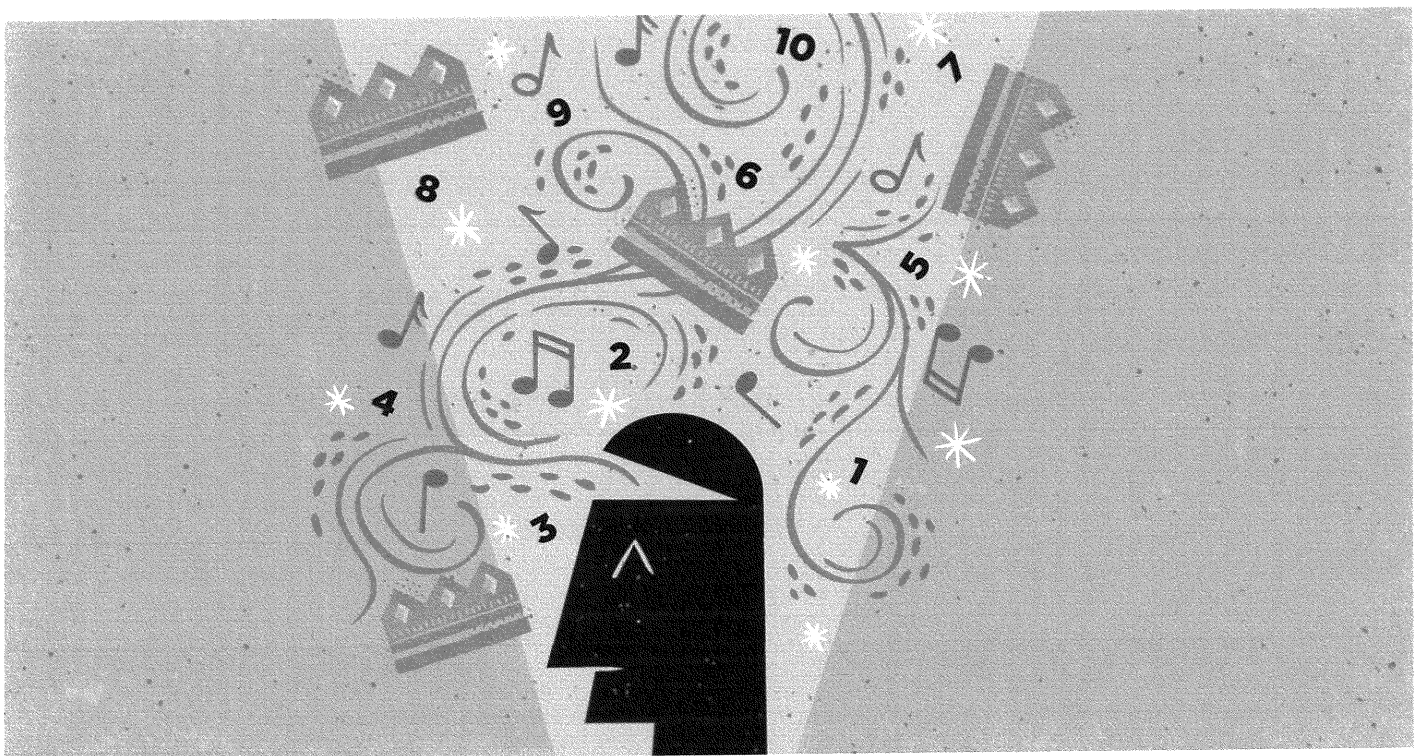


Articles

# 10 Things You Should Know about the Psalms

August 12, 2023

by: Bruce K. Waltke, Fred G. Zaspel



*This article is part of the 10 Things You Should Know series.*

## 1. The book of Psalms has no (original) title.

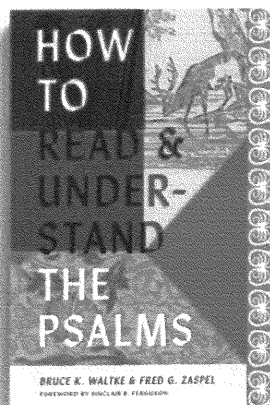
The Hebrew Bible provides no title to the book of Psalms. Old Testament books in

the Hebrew text are sometimes named according to the first words of the book. For example, the title of Genesis is *In the Beginning*, the title of Exodus is *These Are the Names*, and the prophetic books are named after the prophet himself. But the book of Psalms has no title in the Hebrew text.

Psalm 72:20 may hint of an early collection of some of the psalms when it says, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.” It may be that an early collection of psalms was named *The Prayers of David*.

The title of the book in Rabbinic and subsequent Hebrew literature is *Book of Praises* or simply *Praises* (*tehillim*). Although this word (in the singular) is used to title just one psalm (Ps. 145), its later use as a title for the book itself derives from its content—the book of Psalms is a book of praises. Psalms of all specific genres, even laments, are regularly couched in praise.

The Hebrew word for *psalm* occurs dozens of times in the book, and the Septuagint (Codex Vaticanus) picks this up in the plural as the title of the book: *Psalmoi*. In Codex Alexandrinus, the title given is *Psalterion* (an ancient stringed instrument) from which we have the name *Psalter*. Then, in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, it became *Libra Psalmorum*, *The Book of Psalms*. So the English title, *The Book of Psalms*, comes to us from the Greek through the Latin. The Hebrew word *psalm* denotes a liturgical song sung to an instrumental accompaniment, but because the note of praise is so dominant in these psalms, the word has come to denote simply a song of praise, a sacred song, or a hymn.



## How to Read and Understand the Psalms

*Bruce K. Waltke, Fred G. Zaspel*

Developed from a lifetime of studying and teaching, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* gives readers tools to learn how to properly interpret and internalize the Psalms.

### **2. The book of Psalms is a universal favorite.**

The evidence for this assertion is overwhelming and has been so from the church's earliest days. Jesus and his apostles cited verses from the Psalms so frequently and with such ease and immediate grasp that they appear to have spent their lives in the Psalter. In the early centuries of the church, ministers memorized the entire collection. And all throughout the history of the church, the Psalms has been among the first books of the Bible translated and the most commonly read and memorized. Many verses from the Psalms seem lodged in the memory of virtually all Christians, and Psalm 23 is probably the most well-known text in the world. From Jesus to us, the Psalter has been the treasure of God's people everywhere.

### **3. Psalms are poetry, and they must be read as such.**

Poems are not narrative, and we can't read the Psalms (profitably) if we read them like we read, say, the books of Samuel or Acts. We read narrative linearly, following the story along rather common lines of thought (protagonist, antagonist, challenge or threat, etc.) to the climactic end. Poetry is not laid out quite that way. The lines are brief and compact and often convey the message only subtly and with figures of speech. And with Hebrew poetry in particular, like the psalms, the verses consist of parallel lines to convey the thought. If the verse has two lines, the second in some



way informs the first. If the verse has three lines, the second and third inform the first. To read a psalm profitably we cannot just gloss over the lines quickly to the end, or much will be missed. We must pay attention to the details. We must ponder the figures of speech to grasp the reality they reflect, and we must consider thoughtfully how the compressed lines inform one another.

It has been said that you can tell it's poetry by all the white space on the page. There is not as much to read, but ironically the compacted details demand closer attention.

#### **4. Psalms have a variety of recognizable forms.**

It has long been recognized that not all the psalms are alike. There are different moods and varying circumstances reflecting every human emotion brought before God. Some psalms are given to praise, and some are given to lament and petition. Some are given to express trusting confidence in the Lord of providence, and some look back with grateful praise for what he has done. And then there is Psalm 110, pure prophecy.

What has not always been recognized is that some of the psalms follow common forms. Just as English poetry has some standard genres (cf. the limerick), so also certain types of psalms follow common forms with common components. The praise psalm typically has 1) a call to praise, 2) a cause or reason for praise, and then 3) a renewed call to praise. The lament psalm typically consists of 1) a direct address ("O God!"), and this often with an introductory lament and/or call for help; 2) the lament; 3) an expression of the psalmist's confidence or trust; 4) the psalmist's petition; and 5) a conclusion or praise.

There are other psalm forms also, such as songs of trust and individual psalms of grateful praise. Not all the psalms follow a given form, and the psalmists themselves did not follow these forms slavishly—there is variety, and often no particular form is

evident. But the psalmists did employ common psalm forms, and recognizing these forms helps us understand what a given psalmist himself was thinking as he wrote. Often preachers have been frustrated as they try to organize their sermon from a given psalm. A recognition of these psalm forms relieves the frustration entirely.

## **5. The superscripts are part of the psalms.**

The superscriptions atop the psalms in our English Bibles, most often italicized, are not an “add-on” or in any way “extra.” They simply follow the Hebrew text and belong to the psalm itself.

Critical scholarship in the last century or so has sought to discredit the superscripts, but the manuscript evidence unanimously points to them as original to the text. This was the standard practice in the ancient near east, and every psalm in the Old Testament outside the psalter has a superscript also. There is no textual reason to deny them.

And the value of the superscripts is enormous. Fourteen of the psalms provide historical setting, such as Psalm 3 (David’s flight from Absalom). Without this historical note we would be without context altogether. And often even the brief “Of David” provides needed setting and context.

The superscripts provide basically two categories of information: authorship and performance. Atop the psalm the psalmist states his name and often the psalm category (“psalm,” “miktam,” etc.). The “performance” part of the superscript (e.g., “to the choirmaster”) always appears first in our superscripts and in fact should be recognized as the postscript to the previous psalm.

## **6. The Psalter has a liturgical setting.**

At Sinai God gave Moses the worship system for ancient Israel. It consisted of a

stated place for worship, a priesthood, sacrifices and offering for various purposes and occasions, and so on. When David brought the ark of the covenant the tent on Mount Zion (1 Chron. 15–16) he preserved Mosaic worship, of course, but he added a musical dimension. Now the offerings were accompanied by singing and musical instruments and were in many ways made a festive occasion.

This is the setting of the Psalms, and evidence of it is pervasive. Throughout the psalms we read of “the house of the Lord,” “his holy hill,” “to the choirmaster,” “Songs of Ascents,” psalms of Zion, psalms of entrance liturgies, enthronement psalms, public processions, musical instruments—all these and more reflecting the temple setting of the Psalter. The psalms did not originate for private but for public use. Even psalms written away from the temple look back to it. This “hymnbook” found its original use by the people of Israel gathered together at the temple in liturgical use. At this point in redemptive history, of course, as Isaac Watts famously argued, we sing these psalms now in light of their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. More on this below.

*From Jesus to us the Psalter has been the treasure of God’s people everywhere.*

## **7. The Psalter consists of five “books.”**

The one hundred and fifty psalms that compose the Psalter are arranged into five books.

- Book 1: Psalms 1–41

- Book 2: Psalms 42–72
- Book 3: Psalms 73–89
- Book 4: Psalms 90–106
- Book 5: Psalms 107–150

One distinction of these divisions is the doxologies at the end of each book. The implications of these divisions are many, and they represent the history of Israel from the united monarchy to the exile.

- Books 1–2 are principally by David and represent the triumph of the king. Here very often David is in crisis, but his psalms usually end in praise.
- Book 3 anticipates Israel’s exile. This is known as the “dark book” of the Psalter. Here Israel’s kings—the house of David—fail, and the sanctuary is destroyed. This book climaxes in Psalm 89 and its lament of the seeming collapse of the Davidic covenant.
- Book 4 is oriented to Israel in exile. She has no king, but here the psalms fall back on God in trust that he is their king. Hope is still alive because God is Israel’s eternal refuge.
- Book 5 praises God for Israel’s restoration and return from exile, and here praise is offered to him from among the nations.

## **8. The placement and arrangement of the individual psalms is not haphazard.**

Within these five books the editors seem clearly to have arranged the psalms according to common authorship, genre, theme, and various distinctions and insights. We have psalms of David grouped together (Pss. 3–41), prayers of David (Ps. 72:20), psalms of Asaph (Pss. 73–83), miktam psalms (Ps. 56–60), enthronement psalms (Pss. 95–100), psalms reflecting morning and evening prayers (Pss. 3–6), psalms that celebrate the “name” of the Lord (Pss. 7–9)—these are among the more obvious evidences of editorial arrangements within the Psalter. Psalm 90 stands at

the head of Book 4, it seems, for interpretive reasons. Davidic psalms are placed even in the later “books” preserving the Psalter’s Davidic/royal orientation.

Moreover, Psalms 1–2 together form the gateway to the psalter. Psalm 1 tells us for whom the Psalms are written—those who treasure God’s law and live accordingly. Psalm 2 tells us about whom the Psalms are written—the Lord’s King who, in fulfillment of God’s decree, will reign over his kingdom universally. These two psalms together set the stage for the entire psalter.

The Psalter may rightly be understood as a hymnbook, but we do well to recognize that the songs are placed not haphazardly but intentionally.

## **9. The Psalms focus on the king.**

The Psalter has a distinct royal orientation. It is not just a hymnbook—it is a royal hymnbook, and we may picture ancient Israel singing these songs as they gathered around their king at the temple.

The evidence of this royal orientation is extensive. Most obvious is the prominence of David, whose name appears in the superscript of about half of the psalms and who is the subject of others (e.g., Ps. 89). Beyond David himself are Solomon (Ps. 72; Ps. 127) and other Davidic kings (e.g., Ps. 45). The “enemies” so often in view in various psalms are nations and military forces. The alternating “I” and “we” also reflects the king who represents the people.

All Christians read the Psalter “devotionally,” as we ought. But we will miss the psalmists’ message if we assume the “I” and the “me” is Mr. Everyman or some other pious Israelite. The psalms are not in their first instance about us; pervasively it is the king who is in view.

## 10. The Psalms are about Jesus.

The significance of this royal orientation goes further as we seek to understand the psalms in canonical perspective. We have it on Jesus's authority (Luke 24:44) that the psalms are about him. Some of the psalms are more directly predictive, such as Psalm 2 and Psalm 110. In others David stands as a "type" or picture of Christ and is prospective of him in more subtle ways. In some, the language describes the king in terms that go beyond the historic kings and can refer, finally, only to the Lord Jesus (Ps. 45:6; cf. Heb. 1:8). And we can see from the use of the psalms in the New Testament, both from Jesus and his apostles, that the Davidic king ought to be recognized as prospective of David's greater son. Often the psalms present the king in his ideal, an ideal of which all David's other sons fell far short. Yet this ideal anticipates a king still to come. David and his kingdom foreshadow Christ and his kingdom.

When David hands his psalms "to the choirmaster" for the congregation to sing, he gives them to us to sing also. And as ancient Israel sang of their king, so we sing these same psalms now in recognition of their fulfillment in God's Anointed, the Lord Jesus Christ, who in his death, resurrection, and ascension has inaugurated God's universal kingdom, and who in his return will bring that rule to glorious consummation.

*Bruce K. Waltke and Fred G. Zaspel are the authors of How to Read and Understand the Psalms.*

**Bruce K. Waltke** (ThD, Dallas Theological Seminary; PhD, Harvard University) is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Studies at Regent College and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Knox Theological Seminary. He is the author of *An Old Testament Theology* and commentaries on Genesis, Micah, and Proverbs. Bruce is a member at Advent Anglican Church in Woodinville,