

Psalm 33

Psalm 33

Context

Like Psalm 25, Psalm 33 does not appear to be part of a larger cluster of Psalms. It is a hymn of praise to God, focused on his work in creation (4-7), his rule over the nations (8-15), and his salvation of his people (16-19).

There are only three hymns in Book 1, a much lower proportion than in any other book (Figure 1, chart). Even Book 3, the book of desolation, has more than twice as many hymns by comparison. This distribution makes these three hymns of special interest.

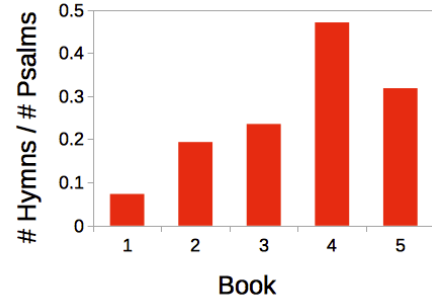


Figure 1: Hymns per Book

Figure 2 shows the latest revision of our outline of Book 1. The first two hymns are Psalms 8 and 19. Each comes at the pinnacle of a group of Psalms, one focusing on God’s deliverance of the weak and suffering, the other on God’s dwellingplace and the qualifications to dwell with him. These two groups correspond to two more groups that follow Psalm 25, on God’s dwellingplace (26-32) and the sufferer (34-38), respectively. These two groups include no hymns, but Psalm 33, standing between them, serves the same purpose as the pinnacles of 3-14 and 15-24. Vv. 1-3 and 20-22 link it to 32:11, while v. 18 links it to 34:15-16. Psalm 25 continues to stand as the unpaired center of the overall book.

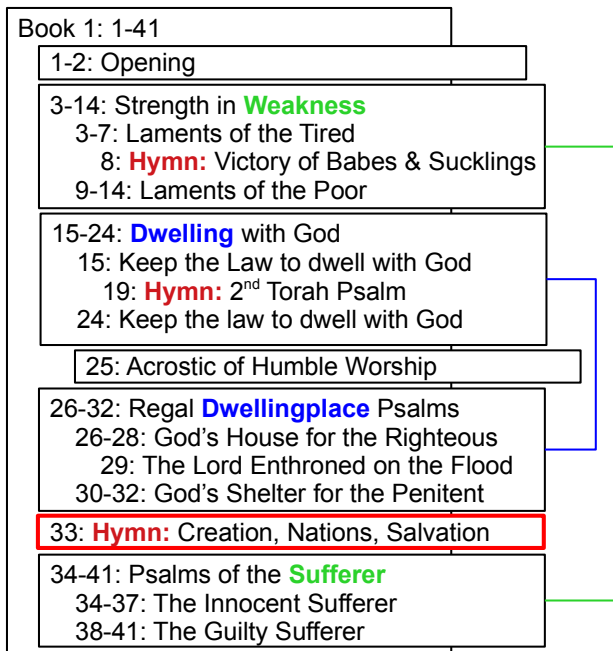


Figure 2: Structure of Book 1 (revised)

Structure

Figure 3 (chart) shows the structure of Psalm 33 and its relation to the rest of Book 1.

It begins with an exhortation for the righteous to praise the Lord (vv. 1-3), and ends with a declaration of praise to him (20-22) for saving his people. This introduction and conclusion echo the two categories that mark the larger clusters of Psalms within Book 1. The opening emphasizes that it is the righteous, the upright, who should praise the Lord. This teaching aligns with the dwellingplace clusters, which emphasize the moral requirements for those who would dwell with the Lord. The conclusion thanks the Lord for being the help and shield of those who trust in him, corresponding to God’s care for the weak in the first and last clusters.

In the body of the Psalm, the Psalmist gives us two reasons to offer the praise described in the opening and closing. The language in these center two sections is a summary of three parts of the Pentateuch. The first section is based on the description of creation in Genesis 1 and the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 15, while the second recalls Moses’ teaching about God’s covenant

Psalm 33

choice of Israel in Deuteronomy 7 and 33. Each of these reasons ends with a contrast that shows why the Lord is superior to people.

These two reasons for praise correspond to the two previous hymns in Book 1. 33:4-11, celebrating God's revelation as demonstrated in creation, corresponds to the dual revelation of Psalm 19, while 33:12-19 recall God's salvation in Psalm 8. (See Note for earlier version.)

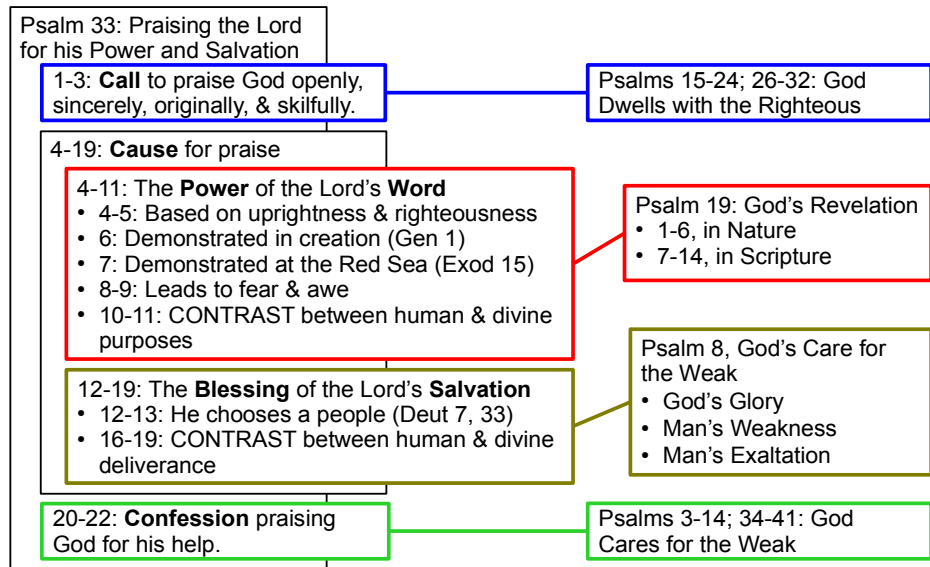


Figure 3: Structure of Psalm 33 & Relation to Psalm 19

The overall structure of this Psalm, combining a *call to praise* with the *cause for praise*, is common in hymns.¹ The shortest Psalm in the Bible, 117, is a cameo example (Table 1, chart).

The Psalm has no heading. Apart from the introductory Psalms 1-2 and Psalm 10 (part of Psalm 9), it is the only Psalm in Book 1 not assigned to David.

1-3, Call to Praise

With the vocabulary here and in the close (vv. 20-22), compare 32:11 (Table 2). But what a different motive—not forgiveness of sin, as in Psalm 32, but the Lord's righteousness and judgment.

Psa 33:1 Rejoice רִנֵּן in the LORD, O ye righteous: *for praise is comely for the upright.* **2 Praise** the LORD with harp: **sing** זָמַר unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. **3 Sing** שִׁיר unto him a new song; **play skilfully** with a loud noise תְּרוּעָה.--The opening invocation describes five characteristics of praise:

It is **communal**. The verbs are all plural. We should meet privately with the Lord, but he also wants us to express our praise for him among others.

It is **open**, verbal. The first word, "Rejoice," refers to a cry of jubilation; the last to the blast of a trumpet, a war-cry, or a loud shout.

	Psalm 117	Psalm 33
Call to Praise	1 O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. 2b Praise ye the LORD.	vv. 1-3, 20-22
Cause for Praise	2a For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever.	vv. 4-19

Table 1: Call to Praise and Cause for Praise

Psalm 32	Psalm 33
11 Be glad שָׂמֵחַ in the LORD, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy רִנֵּן, all ye that are upright in heart .	1 Rejoice רִנֵּן in the LORD, O ye righteous: <i>for praise is comely for the</i> upright. ... 21 For our heart shall rejoice שָׂמֵחַ in him, because we have trusted בטח in his holy name.

Table 2: Psalm 32 & Psalm 33

1 Westermann (Praise and Lament in the Psalms) calls these "Descriptive Psalms of Praise."

Psalm 33

It is **sincere**, coming from those who are righteous and upright (as in 32:11). David had to repent before he could offer praise (chart):

Psa 51:14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: *and* my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. 15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. 16 For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give *it*: thou delightest not in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. 18 Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.

It is **original**. This is the first of six references to a “new song” in Psalms.² Isaiah (42:10) and John (Rev 5:9; 14:3) also pick up the expression.³ Yet the themes of this Psalm are in fact very old, taking us back to the creation of the world and Israel’s early history. The key to the paradox may reside in the use of the verbal form of “new,” which in the OT almost always has the sense of “renew.” The psalmist is warning against staleness in our worship, urging us to appropriate anew the ancient praises of God and appreciate them in our situation.

Finally, it is **skillful**, done with care and attention.

4-11, The Power of the Lord’s Word

4 For the word of the LORD is right [ישר upright]; and all his works are done in truth. 5 He loveth righteousness and judgment: the earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.--The overarching theme of the first half is the power of God’s word. It is characterized as upright, truth, righteousness, judgment, and goodness.

Vv. 1-3 laid down the requirement that those who praise the Lord should be righteous and upright. Here we see the reason: the Lord himself is marked by uprightness and righteousness.

Now he gives two examples of the power of God’s word.

6 By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath [spirit רוח Strong 7307] of his mouth.--The first is the creation. The Psalmist draws on the vocabulary of Genesis 1:

Gen 1:2 And the **Spirit** of God moved upon the face of the waters. 3 And God **said**, Let there be light: and there was light.

The Fathers loved to see in this verse the trinity—the Lord (the Father) creating the earth by his Word (the Son, John 1) and his Spirit.

7 He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses.--The second example is God’s power over the waters in the Exodus. First we recall the Red Sea, celebrated in the Song of Moses, an “old song” that here becomes the heart of the “new song”:

Exo 15:8 And with the blast רוח of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as an **heap**, *and* the **depths** were congealed in the heart of the sea.

2 See also 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1.

3 Isaiah invites the nations to join in the song; John connects it with being redeemed.

Psalm 33

Exod 15:8, 10 also refer to God's **רוּחַ**. Where is God's word, the theme of this section (v. 4)? Both the piling up of the waters (Exod 15:8), and the subsequent destruction of the enemy, were done at the express command of the Lord (chart):

Exo 14:15 **And the LORD said unto Moses**, ... 16 But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry *ground* through the midst of the sea.

Exo 14:26 **And the LORD said unto Moses**, Stretch out thine hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.

8 Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.-- Moses anticipated this in his song (though not with these Hebrew words):

Exo 15:14 The people shall hear, *and* be **afraid**: **sorrow** shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina. 15 Then the dukes of Edom shall be **amazed**; the mighty men of Moab, **trembling** shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall **melt** away. 16 **Fear** and **dread** shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be *as* still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O LORD, till the people pass over, *which* thou hast purchased.

And in fulfillment, Rahab told the spies (chart),

Jos 2:9 I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your **terror** is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land **faint** because of you. 10 For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; ... 11 And as soon as we had heard *these things*, our hearts did **melt**, neither did there remain any more **courage** in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he *is* God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.

It's a good start to fear the Lord. But it's only the beginning. In a moment, we'll see the next step.

9 For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.--This verse summarizes the two great events described in the previous verses, the creation and the parting of the Red Sea. "He spake, and it was" is a summary of creation. "He commanded, and it stood fast" describes the behavior of the waters, standing up in a stable pile.⁴

The section concludes with a contrast, setting the counsel and thoughts of the heathen against the Lord's. "Devices" (v. 10) and "thoughts" (v. 11; the same word, **מַחְשְׁבוֹת**) refer to the plans made by an individual, while "counsel" focuses on discussions among several parties (in the Lord's case, the heavenly court).

10 The LORD bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect.

11 The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts [devices] of his heart to all generations.--The point of the examples from creation is that the Lord is superior to people in his ability to plan and carry out his will.

4 While the verb "stood" עמד does not appear in Exodus 15, 15:8 uses the synonym נצב The terms are parallel in Gen. 45:1; Isa. 3:13; 21:8. עמד is used to describe the parting of the Jordan in Jos 3:15, where also the waters are described as a "heap" גֹּד.

Psalm 33

12-19, The Blessing of the Lord's Salvation

Now the Psalmist turns from the Lord's power in creation to the blessing experienced by those whom he saves.

12 Blessed אֲשֶׁרִי is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.--After 1:1, 2:12, and 32:1-2, this verse is the next instance of the expression "Blessed is xxx." Just as the first panel recalls Genesis 1 and Exodus 15, the second panel is based on Deuteronomy. The first part of the verse recalls the first instance of this expression in the Bible:

Deut. 33:29 **Happy art thou**, O Israel: who *is* like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help, and who *is* the sword of thy excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places.

The end of the verse goes back to the beginning of Deuteronomy:

Deu 7:6 For thou *art* an holy people unto the LORD thy God: **the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself**, above all people that *are* upon the face of the earth.

13 The LORD looketh נֹבֵט from heaven; he beholdeth רֹאֵה all the sons of men. 14 From the place of his habitation he looketh שֹׁגֵה upon all the inhabitants of the earth. 15 He fashioneth their hearts alike; he considereth בִּיחַ all their works.--Israel is not the only nation that God sees. The Psalmist multiplies synonyms for vision to emphasize that nothing escapes God's knowledge. Each verse states that all people fall under his gaze. He has indeed chosen Israel, but he intimately knows the rest of his creation.

Paul uses visual language to describe the time of Israel's dominance:

Act 17:30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

"Winked" is υπεροραω, literally "overlook." His focus on Israel was not because he had no relation to the other nations, but because he chose to overlook them for a time, but even the OT recognizes that he has a plan for them too.

16 There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. 17 An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. 18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope יִהְיֶה in his חֶסֶד mercy; 19 To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.--The section on God's power in creation ended with a contrast between human and divine plans. This section on his care for his human creatures similarly ends with a contrast, this time between alternative means of deliverance (repeated in vv. 16, 19). God is superior to people in his ability to defend his people. Nations trust in vain in the size of their army, their cavalry, or their strength. But those who are in covenant relation with God ("his mercy") enjoy the care of "his eye."

God's eye is not just another expression for his vision, as in vv. 13-15. There the point was his omniscience, but expressions about the eyes of the Lord express his particular care and attention. The earliest instance of the expression is in Deuteronomy (chart):

Psalm 33

Deu 11:11 But the land, whither ye go to possess it, *is* a land of hills and valleys, *and* drinketh water of the rain of heaven: 12 A land which the LORD thy God careth for: **the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it**, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

David picks it up here, and even more clearly in Psalm 34, quoted in 1 Pet 3:12,

Psa 34:15 **The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous**, and his ears *are open* unto their cry. 16 The face of the LORD *is* against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

Solomon used this language when he prayed for God's gracious attention to prayers from the temple:

1Ki 8:29 That **thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day**, *even* toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place.

Later, Hanani the seer says to king Asa,

2Ch 16:9 For **the eyes of the LORD** run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to **shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him**.

Just as David resolves to keep the Lord central in his vision (16:8), the Lord pays special attention to those who trust in him. The Psalmist urges us to “behold” this insight into the “eye of the Lord.” We do not need to have universal knowledge or insight. It is enough that we know that God knows.

v. 18 describes two requirements if we would enjoy this special care. First, we must fear him. We saw in v. 8 that this is the natural and expected response to God's creative power. But in itself, it does not place us under God's loving eye. We must also “hope in his mercy,” that is, his covenant love. The men of Edom and Moab (Ex 15:14) feared the Lord, but did not lay hold on his mercy. Rahab did, and became an ancestress of our Lord.

20-22, Promise of Inward Worship

20 Our soul waiteth **הכה** for the LORD: **he is our help and our shield**. **21 For our heart shall rejoice שמח** in him, because we have trusted **בטח** in his holy name. **22 Let thy mercy חסד, O LORD, be upon us, according as we hope יהל in thee.**--The closing verses have three connections that we should notice.

First, they obey the exhortation of the first three verses. There, the Psalmist enjoined the congregation (plural verbs) to praise the Lord together. Here, the congregation replies that they are doing so.

Second, like the opening verses, they echo 32:11, this time with the verb for “rejoice” (the opening “be glad” in 32:11), and the reference to their heart.

Third, they lay hold on the promise of vv. 18-19. Those verses urged those who sing the Psalm to pay special attention to God's care, as he delivers the soul of those who hope in his mercy. The singers claim this promise. It is their **soul** (v. 20) that waits for the Lord, **hoping** in him because of his **mercy** (v. 22).

Psalm 33

Notes

Former Analysis of Psalm 33

As originally presented, I analyzed the relation of Psalm 33 to Psalm 19 as shown in Figure 4. The present analysis, developed during the overall synthesis of Book 1 in June 2018, has the advantage of accounting for both of the previous hymns. Here is the earlier text:

These two reasons for praise [33:4-11; 12-19] correspond to the two halves of

Psalm 19, one of the other hymns in Book 1. In both Psalms 19 and 33, the first half deals with God's general power in nature, while the second (Israel in Psalm 33, the law in Psalm 19) focuses on how he reveals himself to his people.

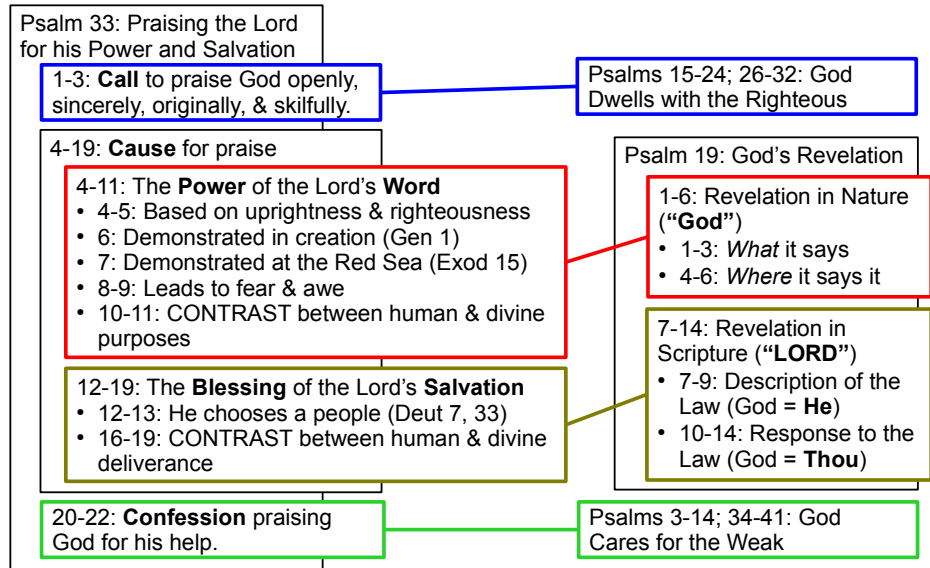


Figure 4: Structure of Psalm 33 & Relation to Psalm 19