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THE PSALMS: GOD'S HYMNBOOK

Overview of the Psalms

by

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Psalms: Lesson 1

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Throughout history, when the hearts of God's people have been right before Him there has been singing and music. When God brought His people out of captivity in Egypt and delivered them from Pharaoh's pursuing army, Exodus 15:1 records that they sang a song to the Lord. When God gave Israel victory over Jabin, the king of Canaan, under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, they sang (Judges 5). When David brought up the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, there was much joy expressed through singing and music (1 Chron. 15:25-28). When King Hezekiah restored the temple worship in Jerusalem, the Levites sang praises to the Lord with the words of David and Asaph the seer, with joy, while the trumpets sounded and the whole assembly bowed low and worshiped (2 Chron. 29:30).

At the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, just before Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives where He would be betrayed and arrested, they sang a hymn (Mark 14:26), which commentators agree was the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). When Paul and Silas were unjustly thrown into jail in Philippi, with their backs laid open from being beaten and their feet in the stocks, they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25).

Since the days of the New Testament, God's people have continued to sing. In A.D. 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan which reported, among other things, that the Christians sang hymns to Christ as God. In 1415, the Bohemian Reformer Jan Hus sang praises to God as he was burned at the stake. During the Reformation, Martin Luther promoted music in the church. A century and a half later, the Pietist movement under Spener and Francke was characterized by singing and hymn-writing. The great revivals under the Wesleys in the 18th Century and Moody and Sankey in the 19th Century were also marked by an upsurge in hymn-writing and singing. And one day in heaven, we will all be gathered around the throne of God, singing praises to the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). Whenever God's people have

their hearts right before Him, there has been, there is, and there will be singing and music.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the longest book in the Bible, the Old Testament book quoted most frequently in the New Testament, is a hymn-book, the book of Psalms. God loves to hear His people sing His praises, and so He sovereignly superintended the inclusion of the Psalms as a major part of His inspired Word. The Book of Psalms has occupied a central place of importance among the Lord's people down through the centuries. There was even a time when as a prerequisite for admission to the priesthood it was mandatory that the candidate be able to recite the entire book! (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 5). In addition to other Bible reading, I'm always reading consecutively through the Psalms. There is no other book in the Bible where I have personally found more help in the crises of life. If I could only take one book of the Bible with me to a desert island, it would be the Psalms.

Today I would like to give you an overview of the Psalms as an introduction to our study of a number of specific psalms in the months ahead. There is a certain amount of information which you need to understand to gain maximum benefit from our study and from your own reading of the Psalms.

1. Title

"Psalms" comes from the Greek word meaning a song sung to a stringed instrument. The book is also called the Psalter. The Hebrew title, Tehillim, means "praises." Every Psalm except Psalm 88 contains praise. (By the way, when you refer to an individual psalm, use the singular, as in Psalm 23; when you are referring to the whole book or to more than one psalm, use the plural, as in Psalms 23 and 24, or the Book of Psalms.) While we no longer know the tunes, we need to remember that the Psalms were set to music.

2. Arrangement, Authorship, Date, Features

The Psalms 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); and, Book 5 (Psalms 107-150). Each of the five books concludes with a doxology, signifying the completion of the collection: Psalm 41:13; 72:18-20; 89:52; 106:48; and all of Psalm 150. No one knows for sure what theme was followed in arranging the five books. They seem to have been compiled somewhat independently of one another and then brought together into one collection at a later date. There is some duplication: Psalm 14 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 53 in Book 2; a portion of Psalm 40 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 70 in Book 2; and the latter halves of Psalms 57 and 60 in Book 2 are combined as Psalm 108 in Book 5.

Book 1 is dominated by psalms of David and consists mostly of personal psalms which arose out of his own experiences. Book 2 was probably compiled by Solomon and exhibits more of a national interest. Book 3 was probably compiled soon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., since Psalms 74, 79, and 89 all have references to this event. Book 4 may have been compiled by David, and is more liturgical in nature than Book 1. Book 5 is also liturgical, but contains several postexilic (after the exile in 586 B.C.) psalms. It probably came into being after the return of 537 B.C. Then a scribe, perhaps Ezra (444 B.C.), probably wrote Psalms 146-50 as a conclusion and Psalm 1 as an introduction and compiled the five books into one.

In other words the Book of Psalms as we have it today was the result of a process spanning about 1000 years. It began with individual psalms, the earliest being Psalm 90 by Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.). More than half were written by David (ca. 1000 B.C.). Then the individual psalms were grouped into collections of books for corporate worship, and finally the books were arranged into the final book, probably around 444 B.C. (Ezra's time).

Many psalms contain a superscription which sometimes identifies the author, the historical setting (e.g., Psalms 3, 18, 34), and other features. These psalm-titles are a part of the original Hebrew text (they are verse 1 in Hebrew, thus making

the Hebrew verse numbering differ in many places from the English) and are just as inspired as the rest of the psalm.

From these psalm-titles, we learn: David wrote at least 73 psalms. (From Acts 4:25-26 and Hebrews 4:7 we learn that he also wrote Psalms 2 & 95. From 1 Chron. 16:8-36, we can surmise he also probably wrote Pss. 96, 105, & 106.) Two Levitical clans wrote 22 psalms: Asaph (plus his descendants, 12 psalms: 50, 73-83); the Sons of Korah (10 psalms: 42, 44-49, 84, 87, 88; Psalm 88, which may have been compiled by the Sons of Korah, specifies Heman the Ezrahite as its author). Solomon wrote two (Psalms 72, 127). Ethan the Ezrahite wrote one (Psalm 89). Moses wrote one (Psalm 90). The other 51 psalms do not specify any author.

Some psalm-titles indicate technical names to designate the type of psalm: "Psalm," emphasizing stringed accompaniment (57 psalms have this title); "Song," indicating a joyful melody (12 have this label, e.g., Ps. 46); "Maskil," a contemplative or didactic psalm, intended to instruct (13 have this label, e.g., Ps. 32); "Miktam," meaning uncertain; possibly atonement psalms (six psalms: 16, 56-60); "Prayer" (Pss. 17, 86, 90, 102, 142); "Praise" (Ps. 145); and a number of lesser-used titles (Pss. 7; 38 & 70; 60; 92; 100; 145).

Also a number of musical terms are used, such as, "to the choir director" (50 psalms, e.g., Pss. 4, 5, 6). There are other notations describing the kind of instrument to be played as accompaniment (Pss. 4, 5, 6) or the tune that the song is sung to (Pss. 9, 22, 45, 46, 60).

Some psalms have liturgical indicators to instruct the worshiper as to the intended use of the psalm in worship (Pss. 92, 100, 102, 120-34, "Songs of Ascent," probably used by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the feasts).

The familiar term, "Selah," which occurs 71 times in the body of 39 psalms (e.g., Ps. 3:2, 4, 8), probably is a musical notation informing the worshipers either to pause and reflect, or else to lift up their voices. It is not to be read aloud.

3. Hebrew poetry

The psalms are poetry, and you need to understand something about Hebrew poetry to understand and appreciate the psalms. There are three elements of Hebrew poetry to keep in mind as you read the Psalms (and other poetical books such as Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations):

A. Parallelism

Instead of rhyming words, as our poetry does, the Hebrews rhymed ideas. One of the key features of Hebrew poetry is the idea of parallelism. There are several main types:

Synonymous--This occurs frequently. The second line is similar to the first. (Every verse of Psalm 114 has synonymous parallelism.)

Synthetic--The second line takes up and develops further a thought begun in the first line (see Pss. 19:7-10; 95:3).

Climatic--The second line takes up some words from the first line and adds to or completes them (Pss. 22:4; 29:1, 2).

Emblematic--One line presents an image or metaphor which the other line clarifies or applies (Pss. 23:1; 42:1; 44:22; 103:13).

Antithetical--The second line contrasts with the first (Ps. 1:6; 90:6).

B. Figures of Speech

Hebrew poetry is loaded with figures of speech, and you must recognize that fact in interpreting various passages. For example, Psalm 18:7-15 describes the power of God

as seen in a thunderstorm which apparently was sent in answer to David's prayer in battle. It describes God in anthropomorphic terms. Literal interpretation of the Bible does not mean that you interpret such figures of speech literally. God doesn't have smoke coming out of His nostrils or fire coming from His mouth (Ps. 18:8)!

C. Acrostics

Acrostics are alphabetical psalms, where each verse (or in Psalm 119, each verse of successive stanzas) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Pss. 9-10 [together = one acrostic], 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145, and Lamentations).

Keep in mind that the psalms are poetry and must be read as such. You've got to get into an aesthetic mind-set to benefit from the psalms. If you approach them rationalistically or scientifically you will miss the flavor of them. They are full of emotion, art, beauty, and figurative language. The psalmists were trying to draw forth not just an intellectual response, but also an emotional one.

4. Themes

There are a number of themes running through the Psalms. Let me outline just five:

A. The character of God

God's attributes are frequently extolled in the psalms: His righteousness, power, sovereignty, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, etc. (see Pss. 25:8, 10; 63:2-3). The psalms reveal an almighty God who is gracious and compassionate to His people, but who will impartially judge the wicked.

B. The Kingdom of God

The concept of God's ruling on the earth through His anointed king runs throughout the psalms (e.g., Pss. 2, 96-99, 110). There is throughout the concern for God's justice and righteousness to be ushered in through the theocratic kingdom.

C. The Messiah of God

Closely connected with the kingdom is God's Messiah. Many psalms are "messianic," meaning that in whole or part they prophesy of Christ and His rule (Pss. 2, 22, 45, 72, 110).

D. The Worship of God

The psalms put a great stress on both personal and corporate worship of God. There are frequent individual declarations of praise (Pss. 5:11-12; 9:1-2) as well as references to the sanctuary, the temple, and corporate worship (Pss. 5:7; 9:14; 84, 122).

E. The Experience of man

Many psalms flow out of real-life situations. It is not that some guy sat down in abstract meditation and wrote the psalm. As one commentator puts it, "They are often wet with the tears and the blood of the writer" (Leupold, p. 28). The enemy is in hot pursuit of David. He cries out to God for help. God responds and delivers him in the face of incredible odds. After he catches his breath, he sits down and recounts the situation in his mind, and out of the overflow of emotions, he writes a psalm extolling the greatness of God. (David's life situation: Pss. 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142.)

Because of this real-life birthplace of the psalms, you will find that the concept of God is personal and immediate. God is not some abstract theological idea to the psalmist. These authors knew the connection between God's reality and their immediate crises (see Pss. 56, 57, 59, 60,

63). Even if the situation is not stated, many times you can pick up the circumstances of the author from the context.

This means that to appreciate the psalms, you've got to feel with the life-situation of the psalmist. The gamut of human emotions are represented in the psalms: fear (Pss. 3:6; 27:1-3); shame (25:2-3); guilt (32:3-4; 38; 51); depression (42, 43); feeling abandoned by God (13); utter helplessness (18:4-6); being betrayed and attacked by those you trusted (55; 57:3-4); as well as great joy, contentment, and delight in God (103; 145). Luther said that these hymns enable us to look directly into the heart of God's saints (Leupold, p. 27), and he was right.

5. Main lessons

There are many lessons we will learn. Let me focus on four main ones:

A. Praise is important.

The psalms are filled with praise and with exhortations to praise God. To praise God means essentially to extol God for His attributes and actions. Thus, to praise God we must come to know Him as revealed in His Word and we must be involved with God in our personal lives so that we experience His actions on our behalf. We will find that the psalmists knew God in this way. We need to put more emphasis on praise in the Christian life.

B. Prayer is important.

Many of the psalms are prayers, cried out to God from the crucible of life. The psalms show us that no experience in life is too high or low to exclude God. We are to call on Him when we are in the pits and we are to call on Him when we're on the peaks.

C. Corporate worship is important.

It's not enough to praise God all alone, as important as that is. We need to worship God corporately and sing His praises together. There's something about the corporate aspect of worship that is satisfying to God and man. The psalms are God's corporate worship book.

D. Beauty and creativity are important.

Our God is the creator of beauty, an infinitely creative God. We see His handiwork in the natural world, and the psalms are full of appreciation for the beauty God has created (Pss. 8; 19:1-6). He has given us the privilege of entering into the creative process in many ways. While inspired by the Spirit of God, the psalms reflect the creativity of the authors, and God is pleased with it. Both the creative works of God in nature and the creative works of man, created in God's image, should focus our thoughts on the greatness of our Creator-God.

Conclusion

Here are a few action points:

1. Read the Psalms devotionally. I read through Psalms and Proverbs separately from other Bible reading. I try to read one per day and when I finish, I start all over again. I've read that Billy Graham reads five per day, so he goes through them once a month. You need to be continually and repeatedly meditating on the psalms to develop your heart before God. Remember, the main author was a man after God's heart!
2. Memorize the Psalms. Many whole psalms as well as portions are worth the effort of memorizing. If you struggle with depression, memorize verses on joy and praise. If you struggle with anxiety, memorize verses on peace, freedom from fear, and trusting God. Jot them on 3 x 5 cards and read them often until you know them.
3. Sing the Psalms. Many of the psalms are now being put to

music. That's great! (It's also a good way to memorize them.) Listen to praise tapes. If you have a musical bent, consider putting some of the psalms to music.

4. Pray the Psalms. One modern writer laments, "We are in danger of losing the Psalter in our churches; indeed, many have already lost it, and so it is no accident that many people in our congregations do not know how to pray" (Elizabeth Achtemeier, cited by Willem VanGemeren in *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 5:6). As you read the Psalms devotionally and come to a part that is a prayer, turn it into your own prayer: "Make me know Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths" (Ps. 25:4). Or perhaps the psalm points out a lack in your life. Turn it into prayer: "Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; Let those who love Your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified'" (Ps. 40:16). "Lord, I don't rejoice in You enough. Help me to magnify You in my life!"

John Calvin begins his classic, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles [The Westminster Press], p. 35) with this profound statement: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." The Psalms will take us deeper in both of those aspects of wisdom. Let's ask God to teach us about Himself and about ourselves as we study the Psalms in the coming months.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Some churches emphasize doctrine but downplay feelings; others tend toward emotion at the expense of doctrine. Where's the biblical balance?
2. Is praise a command or something we only do when we feel like it? How can we develop sincere praise for God?
3. Jonathan Edwards argued that "true religion lies very much in the affections" [= emotions] and that we are to sing praises to God "to excite and express" such emotion. Agree/disagree?
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