

The Book of Psalms

Introduction: The New Testament quotes the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. No doubt it is the most quoted book in modern hymnals. It is at home in the worship of the church, in the funeral parlor, in the hospital, in the wedding chapel, as well as in the privacy of the living room. The fact that it is included in the back of many New Testaments is testimony to its daily usefulness for the people of God even today.

- I. Perhaps what impressed me the most about the psalms is how important singing was to the faith of the Israelites.
 - A. Its importance is seen way before the assembly of the five books of Psalms that are united in our one collection of songs known as “The Book of Psalms.”
 1. Crossed the Red Sea – Moses wrote a song about it – Exo. 14:30-31, 15:1-18, 15:20-21.
 2. Three poetic pieces written and recorded as Israel comes toward the end of their wilderness wanderings, one identified as a song – Num. 21:14-15; 16-18; 23-30. (NOTE: A blurring of the lines between poetry, proverbs, and psalms.)
 3. At the inauguration of Joshua as Israel’s leader, Moses was instructed to write a song and teach it to the Israelite people, about committing themselves to the Law of God when they entered into the Promised land – Deut. 31:14-32:44.
 4. The song of Deborah and Barak after Israel had defeated the Canaanite king Jabin and his General Sisera was killed by Jael – Jud. 4-5. (NOTE: A type of song that is unfamiliar to us, but was very familiar to the Israelites – vss. 24-27. We’ll talk more about that later.)
 - B. Singing reached its zenith under the leadership of David and Solomon. David was a prolific song writer (2 Sam. 23:1 – the “sweet psalmist of Israel.” Who says real men don’t sing!), and Solomon wrote 1005 songs (1 Kings 4:32). (To put that in perspective, Tillet S. Teddlie wrote 130. The Beatles collectively are credited with something under 300 original songs.)
 - C. Reaching past the Psalms, in Ezra and Nehemiah singing played a prominent role in the dedication of the foundation of the new temple (Ezra 3:10-11) and in the dedication of the new walls (Neh. 12:31-43).
 - D. In the Psalms I think we see songs invading most every aspect of an Israelite’s relationship with God.
 1. Songs of a more private nature, for everyday life – “Lament,” etc.: Psa. 25; 142. Discouragement – Psa. 73. Imprecatory – Psa. 69; 109; note Psa. 137:7-9. Dependence on God – Psa. 23; 37. Personal joy and praise – Psa. 34; 63. (NOTE: The blurring of lines between prayer and singing.)
 2. Special occasion psalms – For a royal wedding? – Psa. 45.
 3. Songs of pilgrimage or for preparing for worship. “Songs of Ascent” –

Psa. 24; 120-134.

4. Songs which seem particularly suited for public worship – The “Hallelujah” psalms – Psa. 111-118; 146-150.
5. I cannot think of a single aspect of Israelite life that is not covered in the Psalms. Which means they sang about everything! Sad? Sing a song! Fearful? Sing a song! Discouraged? Sing a song! Thankful? Sing a song! Happy? Sing a song! Going to “church?” Sing a song! At church? Sing a song! Going home from church? Sing a song!

II. So, why the emphasis on writing and singing songs?

- A. Songs stir emotions. How many examples in secular life?
 1. Songs of national pride – Olympic medal ceremonies.
 2. Can stir armies to fervor in war (literal and figurative) – “The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You;” “Hullabaloo, Caneck, Canuck.”
 3. Want to set the mood with that special someone? A little Barry White, Luther Vandross.
- B. Songs help with memorization.
 1. The days of creation, names of the apostles, New Testament books, etc.
 2. Especially helpful in times when printed word was scarce.
 3. How many of us have been helped in our memorizing of passages from the Psalms because of songs we have sung?

III. About the book of Psalms itself:

- A. Authors.
 1. A collection of works by various authors at various times.
 2. 72 are ascribed in some way to David in the Hebrew text (73 if David is “the afflicted” in #102). NOTE:
 - a. There is some discussion among conservative scholars about what makes a psalm a “psalm of David.” Did he write them, was he the compiler of a certain collection of them, or was he merely the subject of them? (By him, for him, or about him?)
 - b. Note that Mat. 22:44-45, Luke 20:41-44, and Acts 2:25-36 make important theological points hinging on David being the author of at least some of the passages that bear his name.
 3. 12 psalms are attributed to Asaph, one of the chiefs of David’s singers at Jerusalem (1 Chron. 6:39; 15:17, 19).
 4. 11 are attributed to the sons of Korah, gatekeepers of the tabernacle and temple, some of whom were accomplished musicians and singers (1 Chron. 9:19; 2 Chron. 20:19).
 5. 1 psalm each is attributed to Heman the Ezrahite (#88), and Ethan the Ezrahite (#89), also musicians in David’s guild (1 Chron. 15:19).
 6. 2 psalms are attributed to Solomon (#72, #127).
 7. 1 psalm is attributed to Moses (#90).

8. 50 psalms are anonymous (the “orphan” psalms).
- B. The collection of the Psalms.
1. Every author I searched opted for the gradual formation of the collection, first in a series of five groups, then in a later collection of two works (1-3 and 4-5), and then (probably under the leadership of Ezra the scribe) the final arrangement into one book as we have it today.
 2. The Psalms are actually five groups (or books) of psalms, each marked by a doxology (a special ascription of praise to God).
 - a. The first two groups (#1-41, #42-72) are mainly Davidic.
 - b. The third group (#73-89) is mainly Asaphian.
 - c. The fourth group (#90-106) is mainly anonymous.
 - d. The fifth group (#107-150) is about 2/5 Davidic and 3/5 anonymous.
 3. Why five groups? “The Midrash comments on Psa. 1:1, “Moses gave to the Israelites the five books of the law, and as a counterpart to these, David gave them the Psalms, which consist of five books.”
- C. Titles of the Psalms.
1. Only 34 psalms are without some sort of title.
 2. The remainder have titles that include one or more of the following:
 - a. Identity of the author. “A Psalm of _____.”
 - b. Historical background of the psalm. “When Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba” (#51).
 - c. Information about the character of the psalm. “A Psalm” (*mizmowr*); “A Song (*shiy*r); “A Contemplation” (*maschil*); “A Prayer” (*rephillah*); “A Praise” (*tehillah*); “A Michtam” (a golden, or precious, thing); “A Meditation” (*shiggayown*).
 - d. Musical directions. Either the kind of musical accompaniment – “On a stringed instrument,” or the tune – “Set to ‘To the Lilies.’”
 - e. Assignment of the psalm (for arrangement or presentation?). “To the Chief Musician;” “To Jeduthun.”
 - f. Intended use of the psalm. “A Song for the Sabbath Day,” “A Song of Ascents.”
 3. When were the titles affixed to the psalms? No doubt they are from antiquity. The fact that the Septuagint translators did not translate some portions of the titles would most likely indicate the titles were old enough for their meanings to have become lost by the third century B.C. I saw no compelling arguments to indicate that the titles do not go back all the way to the authors of the psalms themselves.

IV. Hebrew poetry.

- A. In Hebrew poetry, the rhyme is rhyme of thought. Bellinger (see bibliography) lists at least three kinds of thought rhyme, or parallelism, evident in the Psalms.
1. Synonymous parallelism. The second line, or thought group, reinforces the thought of the first by way of a closely related statement. Note 6:1.

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
Nor chasten me in your hot displeasure.

2. Antithetic parallelism. The second line, or thought group, completes the thought by presenting a contrast to the first line. Note 18:27.

For You will save the humble people,
But will bring down haughty looks.

3. Stair-step parallelism. The second line, or thought group, continues the thought of the first and takes it a step further. Note 18:35-36.

You have also given me the shield of Your salvation;
Your gentleness has made me great,
You enlarged my path under me,
So my feet did not slip.

- B. There is also wonderful use of chiasmic parallelism throughout Psalms. Note 51:1.

a Have mercy upon me, O God,
b According to Your lovingkindness;
b¹ According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
a¹ Blot out my transgressions.

- C. James E. Smith (see bibliography) also notes the following features of Hebrew poetry, some of which are difficult, if not impossible, to display in English translations:

1. Alliteration: Repetition of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables within a verse. (“She sells sea shells by the sea shore.”)
2. Paranomasia: A play on the sound and meaning of words.
3. Acrostic structure: Lines or stanzas begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is the classic example.
4. Terseness: Hebrew poetry is generally brief and to the point.
5. Imagery: Hebrew poetry is rife with vivid or figurative language.

- D. I would refer you to Bullock’s (see bibliography) detailed discussion of structure, wherein he examines “stich” and “strophe” of Hebrew poetry, with its logical units, refrains, acrostics and chiasms (pages 36-43).

V. God in the Psalms.

- A. The central figure in the Psalms is God.

1. He is mentioned in every chapter.
2. 344 times He is Elohim, the Almighty God, creator and sustainer.
3. 676 times He is Yahweh, the Self-existent and Eternal Lord, the lawgiver and judge.
4. 53 times He is Atone, the Sovereign Ruler, the hope of Israel and bane of her enemies.

- B. He is God of heaven and earth (the natural order).

1. He is the creator (89:11-12; 24:1-2; 33:6-7; 104:1-9; 136:5-9).
 2. He is the sustained (65:9-10; 104:11ff; 136:25; 147:4-9; 15-18).
 3. The world reflects His glory (19:1).
 4. It is right that the earth worship Him (98:7-8).
- C. He is God of the nations.
1. He rules over them (22:28; 113:4; 47:8).
 2. He laughs at their schemes (2:1-4; 59:8).
 3. He executes His judgments on and subdues them (9:17; 47:3; 96:13).
- D. He is God of gods.
1. He is above all gods (86:8; 95:3; 135:5).
 2. He is the only God (86:10).
 3. Idolatry is inadequate and foolish (115:4-8; 135:15-19).
 4. Idolaters will be ashamed (97:7).
 5. All nations will worship God (86:9).
- E. He is King of kings.
1. There is no king like Him (76:12).
 2. Kings rule by His decree (75:7).
 3. Kings fall to His judgment and wrath (110:5-6; 136:17-21).
 4. All kings shall praise Him (138:4).
 5. The righteous king of Israel owes all to Him (21:1-7; 78:70-72; 89:20-28).
- F. He is God of corporate Israel.
1. Israel is His by covenant (105:9-10).
 2. Israel is His by redemption (105:12-45, esp. vss. 26-27, 37, 43-44).
 3. Israel is His by right of domain (46:5, 7; 48:3; 114:2; 132:13-14).
 4. Israel is His because of mercy, and not because of comeliness (78:8-72; 106:6-46, esp. vss. 6-8; 43-45).
 5. Israel and Zion are His because of love (87:2).
 6. Because Israel is His, He demands every generations obedience to His law (78:5-7).
- G. He is God of the family.
1. Do not even begin a family without God (127:1).
 2. Families are a blessing from God (127:3-4).
 3. Families of the righteous are blessed by God (128:1-3).
 4. 144:12-15).
- H. He is God of the individual, greatest to least.
1. He is my sovereign, my guide (19:7-9, 11; 37:23; 119, esp. vs. 105).
 2. He is my scourger, my judge (7:3-5; 26:2; 38:2-5; 139:1-4).
 3. He is my savior, my redeemer (34:18; 31:5; 51:1-2).
 4. He is my shepherd, my provider (23:1-4; 145:17-20).
 5. He is my solace, my deliverer (18:2; 31:2-3).

6. He is my sword, my defender, my vindicator (35:1-3; 58:10).

VI. My four point outline of Psalms.

- A. The world is a rough and tough place (Psa. 55:1-5, 9-14; Psa. 73:1-16).
 1. Betrayals happen. You collect enemies, sometimes, among those who are supposed to be your friends. People you trusted will stab you in the back.
 2. Problems happen. You and/or your loved ones have health problems and/or financial problems. You lose your job, and along with it your retirement, your house, and your car. Even worse, you lose your sight, your hearing, or your legs.
 3. Inequity happens. Trials, tribulations, disappointments, discouragements come your way – while at the same time you notice that the wicked seem to have no troubles at all.
 4. Scary things happen. Your nation gets attacked by ruthless men. Evil men roam the streets, looking for trouble.
 5. There are plenty of reasons to be concerned about life. The psalmists were not shy about expressing their concerns to God in song.
- B. Our God is our Rock, our Fortress, our Shepherd (Psa. 18:1-3; Psa. 23).
 1. He has throughout history, and we can be sure that He will continue, to bring every bit of His greatness and goodness to bear for His righteous children.
 2. He does not insulate us from the betrayals, problems, inequities, and scary things that are part of life, but He is with us every step of the way and will see us through them.
 3. There are plenty of reasons to not let our concerns about life turn into paralyzing worry about life. The psalmists were eager to express their dependence upon God in song.
- C. Blessed is the righteous man (Psa. 1:1-3, 6a).
 1. Be determined not to walk, stand, or sit with sinners. If you falter, repent of and confess your sin.
 2. Delight yourself in God's law; meditate on it day and night. Let it be the lamp to your feet and the light to your path.
 3. Like a tree planted by the waters, you will bear fruit, you will not wither, and whatever you do will prosper.
 4. "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (Jas. 5:13).
- D. The ungodly are not so (Psa. 1:4-5, 6b).
 1. They have no root to feed them and keep them grounded, but are like chaff driven away by the wind.
 2. They shall not stand when judgment comes, either in this life or the life to come. They will perish.
 3. Life only seems to favor the wicked. Does the seeming inequities of life get you down? Go to church and sing about your salvation, and it will help

you to see the truth more clearly (Psa. 73:16-20).

4. (Note: We tend to sanitize these things in our songs, the psalmists did not. Thus the imprecatory psalms, which seem so strange to us. We might set Psa. 5:11-12 to a tune, but never 9-10. We sing, "I'm happy today, O yes I'm happy today," but never, "Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock!" – 137:9.)

E. Conclusion: Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for His help,
Whose hope is in the Lord his God,
Who made heaven and earth,
The Sea and all that is in them;
Who keeps truth forever,
Who executes justice for the oppressed,
Who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord gives freedom to the prisoners,
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind,
The Lord raises those who are bowed down;
The Lord loves the righteous,
The Lord watches over the strangers;
He relieves the fatherless and the widow;
But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.

(Chorus)

The Lord shall reign forever –
Your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the Lord!

(Psa. 146:5-10)

Conclusion: There is good reason why the Psalms are appealed to so frequently today. They give timeless answers to life's most troubling question, and in so doing they instruct the questioning heart, sooth the troubled heart, calm the anxious heart, embolden the fearful heart, give balm to the hurting heart, and strengthen the fainting heart. Who doesn't need that at some time in their life?

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