

Introduction to Psalms | 3/29/20

Resources:

Davis, Dale Ralph. *The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life: Psalms 1-12*.

---. *Slogging Along in the Paths of Righteousness: Psalms 13-24*.

---. *In the Presence of My Enemies: Psalms 25-37*.

Duguid, Iain. *Poetry & Wisdom Literature* class lectures, Westminster Theological Seminary.

Godfrey, Robert. *Learning to Love the Psalms*.

Kidner, Derek. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, *Psalms 1-72*.

---. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, *Psalms 73-150*.

Longman, Tremper III. *How to Read the Psalms*.

Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Flow of the Psalms*.

I. Introduction

A. The psalms express the whole range of Christian experience

1. Joy/praise:

Praise the LORD!

Let Israel be glad in his Maker;

let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!

Let them praise his name with dancing,

making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! (Ps 149)

2. Sorrow/lament:

My soul is full of troubles,

and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit;

I am a man who has no strength,

Like one set loose among the dead,

like the slain that lie in the grave. (Ps 88)

3. Indignation

O daughter of Babylon ...

blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!

Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones

and dashes them against the rock! (Ps 137; 108)

4. Hope in hardship

Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?

Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation. (Ps 85)

B. The psalms are man's word to God and God's word to man

1. Man's words to God—thus, they are *devotional*

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love; ...
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! (Ps 51)

2. God's words to man—thus, they are *didactic*

- a. These particular 150 psalms are in the canon, and so are God's word for us.
- b. They are instructive. They teach us about God, about ourselves, about how to think/live/pray.

II. What are the psalms?

A. "Israel's hymnbook"?

1. Yes

- a. They were used in temple (think of all the superscripts before the psalms: "To the choirmaster," "With stringed instruments," "For instruction," etc.)
- b. They were sung at Israel's national festivals (e.g., Pss 113-118 at Passover)

2. No

- a. Some may never have been sung by the people (e.g., Ps 119)
- b. Many other songs were sung by Israel that aren't in the psalter
 - i. Solomon wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kgs 4:32)
 - ii. The Psalter itself grew in stages (what did they sing before it was complete?)

B. "Book of Praises"

1. Hebrew name for the book of Psalms: "Praises"

2. The movement both in individual psalms and in the psalter as whole is in direction of praise

3. This is fitting, because this is the believer's experience. The way of the believer is from suffering in this life → glory in the next life.

- a. This is why the psalms are so helpful to people who are suffering—they give voice to our deepest sorrows and also provide hope right in the thick of it
- b. We can have hope when all is darkness around us because this was also Christ's pattern: suffering → glory
 - i. We should expect this flow from the psalms. Luke 24 says that the Old Testament speaks of Christ's sufferings and the glory to follow.
 - ii. He lived through the suffering here on earth, and now he experiences the glory in heaven.
 - iii. We are united to him, so where he is, we will one day be.

C. Poetry

1. Three major characteristics of Hebrew poetry: PIT

a. Parallelism

i. Repeating the same idea in the second line:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name! (Ps 103)

ii. Posing an opposite idea in the second line:

The LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1)

iii. Adding to the first idea in the second line:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever. (Ps 29)

b. Imagery

i. Example

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped! (Ps 124)

ii. Revel in the metaphor—it will help you love the Lord more! Poetry and imagery is meant to speak to you in a way that mere propositional statements cannot.

iii. Two warnings

1) Don't push the metaphor too far. Don't read more into it than there is. Don't turn it into allegory.

2) Careful not to take the imagery literally. Read it for what it is—a metaphor.

c. Terseness

i. This is not reflected in English quite as much as parallelism or imagery

ii. Hebrew poetry doesn't always explain itself. Says something and moves on.

2. Poetry speaks to whole person—the mind, heart, volition. Tremper Longman III said, "Psalms speak to the mind through the heart."

III. Structure of psalter

A. It is easy for us to forget that Psalms is compiled *as a whole book*

B. 5 books in the Psalter

1. 1-41

2. 42-72

3. 73-89
4. 90-106
5. 107-150

C. This number 5 reflects the Pentateuch (5 books)—God’s law has a central place in Psalms

D. Each book ends with doxology, and Psalms 145-150 form sort of mega-doxology for the whole book.

E. There is a general movement across the five books of the Psalter:

- | | | | | | |
|----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. | Book 1 | Book 2 | Book 3 | Book 4 | Book 5 |
|----|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|

Confrontation → Communication → Devastation → Maturation → Consummation

2. It is worth reading psalms in their context! When reading a psalm, read also the one on either side, for example, to see how they fit together.

IV. Christ in the Psalms (Luke 24; Matt 22 & Ps 110; Acts 2 & Ps 16—we take our cue of interpretation from the New Testament)

A. Christ is the representative singer of the psalms

1. Christ, as an Israelite, sang the psalms (Matt 26:30 singing Ps 113-118; Heb 2:10-13)
2. Christ was made like us in every respect, but without sin (Heb 2:17). He knows the joys of life as well as the sorrows. Remember, Jesus learned to sing these psalms as well. He knows our pain. David Robertson said, “The Psalms are the only part of the Bible that are full of the emotions of Jesus Christ.”
3. So, Ps 23, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want”—Jesus leads us in singing this!

B. Christ is the supreme singer of the psalms

1. Many psalms speak of experiences that we cannot relate to, at least not fully
2. Ps 15 – righteousness

O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent?
 Who shall dwell on your holy hill?
 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right
 and speaks the truth in his heart;
 who does not slander with his tongue
 and does no evil to his neighbor,
 nor takes up a reproach against his friend

a. This isn’t true of us naturally! Psalm 15 points *away* from us *to* Christ. The only way we can identify with this psalm is as we are united to him.

2. Ps 22 – lament

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

- a. We have never been forsaken like Christ was, never betrayed by friends like Christ was.

3. Ps 42 – hope/trust

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

- a. Jesus had unwavering faith in God, even in darkest times: “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” he said.

4. Recognizing Christ as supreme singer helps us avoid moralism. The message of Psalms is not just “Be like David,” but rather to show how Christ was perfect when we are not.

C. Christ is the returning singer of the psalms

1. Many psalms point us forward in time and upward in space—they are eschatological. They are looking to a total and full reign of God on earth as he rules in heaven. *Enthronement psalms* especially do this (psalms which extol the Lord as King). There is a note of longing in these psalms.

2. Ps 47

God has gone up with a shout,
the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.
Sing praises to God, sing praises!
Sing praises to our King, sing praises!
God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.

- a. There is a sense in which this is already true—God reigns *now*.
- b. But there is another sense in which we are looking forward to it being *fully* true—we cry, “Your kingdom come!” “Come quickly, Lord Jesus!”
- c. Cf. Revelation 1—Jesus is in heaven right now reigning as king of universe. Yet we are also waiting for him to return and establish his kingdom fully on earth.
- d. We pray for this when we pray enthronement psalms

3. Regarding the command to “Sing a new song” (occurs 5x in psalter):

- a. This is not a command to write contemporary worship songs, but a command to respond to new acts of God’s redemption with new songs of praise. As God performs wonderful acts of redemption for his people in history, they are commanded to respond to those particular acts of redemption in songs of praise. (The “new song” that angels sing in Rev 5 can’t be sung in Old Testament, because the Lamb hadn’t yet been slain).
- b. God’s most recent acts of redemption in history are: the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, session of Jesus, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Songs about this!

- c. Christians are also looking forward to a final act of redemption: Christ's return. Then, we will sing a "new song," praising him for this—joining with angels in Revelation.
4. This forward-looking perspective shapes the whole Psalter, as we saw earlier.
- a. Many earlier psalms are psalms of lament, but the Psalter ends with many psalms of praise.
 - b. We live surrounded by enemies, by people who say, "There is no God." Yet the nations rage in vain. God is King.
 - c. The Psalter keeps us looking ahead toward heavenly Mt. Zion. It helps us live in this tension of now/not-yet.