



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Getting to Know the Psalms

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Introduction

This sermon begins a series of studies in one of the best loved and most read sections of the Bible, the Psalms.

Given the length of the book, it is not feasible in a short series to do a detailed analysis of all 150 psalms. So, I will focus on some things that help as we read and study these poems on our own. To that end, I will do a general introduction and overview of the entire collection; identify and give examples of the book's major theological themes; and then study several of the poems as representative examples of the different types of psalms the book includes.

A Bible Book We Love to Read

Years ago, I read a sermon on Psalm 1 which included the story of a man who found solace in the Psalms after facing an incredible series of trials. I later used his story and reflection as the introduction to a letter I would send to people who had suffered a recent loss, the cover letter for a gift of a book of readings from the Psalms designed to help them through their first weeks of grief. Here is the preacher's summary of the man's story and what he said about the psalms.

A friend of mine has recently been going through the sort of sifting and trial that only those who have experienced it themselves can understand. Within the space of a year, his wife died, he suffered a major spiritual failure, and he lost his job. Here is part of a note he sent some of us who have tried to stay in touch with him during this triple ordeal of death, sin, and financial crisis:

I live in the Psalms. I never knew they existed before. I have learned that "my soul finds rest in God alone.... He alone is my rock ... My salvation and my honor depend on him" (Psa. 62). I have learned that "I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy"; he "delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (Psa. 116). I love him and trust him more today than I ever have. I have lost my soul-mate, the mother of my children, my reputation and self-respect, my vocation, my income, and my health. Yet I have learned that God alone is enough. More than enough.¹

¹ From a sermon by Rubel Shelly, "Psalm 1: Life is a Choice," October 4, 1998. I retrieved and printed it for my files from a website of Shelly's materials which is no longer active.

That man's sentiments are typical of the way many people of God have approached Psalms. Some other assessments of the book help us understand why.

First, the book of Psalms is unique as "a collection of literature of prayer, praise and meditation. If the Bible's narrative materials relate what God has done, and the prophetic literature reports what God has said, the Psalms present the response of the people to the acts and words of God" (Limburg 1992, 522).

The use of the Psalms through the centuries by both Jews and Christians shows their esteem in the church's eyes. Despite the fact they originated in the life experiences of a people long ago who lived in a different part of the world with a very different lifestyle and culture from our own, we continue to read them devotionally, draw strength from them in times of trial, and use them as the text for our own worship in song and prayer. They remain a timeless and invaluable resource for us to reflect on God and his ways and express our varied emotions as we live in this fallen and troubled world.

More specifically, we love them because they deal with an aspect of our nature that we often find harder to express. As summarized by Limburg,

The psalms originated as Israel's response to the acts and words of God and, in fact, to what the psalmists saw as God's inaction and silence. As such, they reflect the polar experiences of human life: joy and sorrow. Joy brought before God is praise; sorrow is taken to the Lord in the form of the lament" (Limburg 1992, 531).

The psalms are rich with meaning because they touch on the Bible's greatest themes, expressing ideas about God, about God and people, and about God and the universe (Limburg 1992, 534).

A Bible Book with Important Functions

Studying the names by which the Hebrews designated this book helps us begin to see the functional value of these poems for our faith and spiritual growth. The oldest Hebrew manuscripts do not name the collection as a whole, but a note at the end of Book II (Pss 42–72) refers to the foregoing psalms as "prayers" (*tephillah*) (Ps 72.20). Rabbinic and later Jewish literature called the book *Sefer Tehillim*, "book of praises," from a root word that is part of "Hallelujah" ("praise Yah" or YHWH), a term that appears only in the Psalter, always at the beginning or end of a psalm (Pss 104.35; 106.1, 48; 113.1, 9; 146–150). This is not surprising since *praise* is a noun that occurs frequently (Ps 40.3; cf. 22.25; 33.1; 34.1; 48.10; etc.).

More specifically, the key terms used in the poems are *prayers* and *songs of praise*, representing the two fundamental types of psalms: prayers in times of need and songs of praise. These general types served three primary functions, which can be summarized by the terms, *response*, *worship book*, and *Scripture*.

Regarding the *response*, the opening lines of Psalms 3–10, each of which is an address to God, show their basic function. The responses were often cries to God to complain or ask for justice in the face of enemies (Pss 3; 7; 9–10), illness (Pss 31; 32; 38; 39), or the distress of sin (Pss 40; 51; 130). Or they might be responses that were occasioned by good times (Pss 8; 30). Some were designed to fit a particular occasion, perhaps to provide a script or a procession around the city (Ps 48) or for offering sacrifices (Ps 66). Whatever the specific response of a psalm, they arose from what was happening in the lives of the Israelites—*everything* that was happening.

As a *worship book*, it is evident that several of the psalms are overt calls to or adapted to worship (Pss 33.1; 96.1; 98.1; 149.1). Judging from their content, some were used as liturgies, in connection with making an offering (Ps 66.13–15), with processions into the temple or some other notable place (Pss 24.7, 9; 118:19–20), or, as in the case of the Ascent or Pilgrimage Psalms (Pss 120 – 134), as a collection designed for those going up to Jerusalem for one of the recurring festivals (Deut 16.16–17).

Used as *Scripture*, the collection of the psalms into a book and the obvious structure in the layout of the book that scholars have discerned indicate that the collection was designed to serve a particular role in Israel's sacred writings. The theme is used to begin the book (Ps 1) and also appears at other key places throughout the collection (Pss 19; 119). As Limburg writes, "These ancient psalms of Israel are not only hymns and prayers to be sung and prayed at a place of public worship, they are also Scripture, designed to nurture the piety of the people in devotion and meditation" (Limburg 1992, 526).

A Bible Book with Different Types of Poems

The largest group of psalms is comprised of *laments or prayers*. Some are individual laments while others are expressed by the larger community. In times of personal or national crisis, they served the purpose of allowing a person or Israel more broadly to express feelings of grief, abandonment, and bewilderment. We'll look at some specific examples later in our study, but for now will say that they were always expressions of trust that followed a basic form: complaint, request for help, affirmation of trust, and a vow to praise God.

Second, some are *hymns or songs of praise*. Many begin with an imperative plural, indicating that the community is being summoned for the specific task of praising God. These psalms emphasize the unique qualities of God that deserve nothing but our praise and so serve as a means of focusing our trust on him.

Third, some are *songs of thanksgiving*. These psalms express a grateful response to God for a specific act of deliverance from illness and sin (Ps 32), enemies (Ps 18), or trouble in general (Ps 66.14). Often, they are community psalms designed to remind the gathered worshipers of their reason for worship, some point of instruction, or of how God had delivered them. The focus is, again, on God and his blessings.

Fourth are the *royal psalms*. They were composed to highlight some aspect of the life of the king, express a prayer for him, or request a particular blessing for him. The emphasis of these psalms changed after the fall of the monarchy (587 BC), shifting to the ideal king, the Messiah, they expected to come.

Fifth, are the *songs of Zion*. Several poems celebrate the Lord's choice of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem as the earthly center of his presence (Pss 46; 48; 84; 122; etc.). The focus of these psalms is on the Lord's presence and his care for the city of peace.

Sixth, some psalms are *liturgies*. These poems are structured as antiphonal dialogues which associate worship actions with words (Pss 14; 24; 50; 115; 132). Among their functions was the preparation of the people to enter into worship (Ps 24.3, 4–6).

Seventh are the *wisdom and torah psalms*. The wisdom psalms are generally not addressed to God, but "offer reflections on the possibilities and problems of life before God and advice on how best to live that life" (Limburg 1992, 533) (Pss 37; 49; 73; 112; 127; 128; 133). The torah

(instruction) psalms are closely related in that they focus on the benefit of being open to the instruction that shows us how to live (Pss 1; 19; 119).

Conclusion

This introduction, brief as it is, has served to crack the door to let us see the grandeur of this great book and the practical benefit of learning to get more from it. As we conclude and prepare for more study, we will benefit from Martin Luther's summary:

[The Psalter] might be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine ... handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book (*Luther's Works* 35:254, in Limburg 1992, 536).

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Works Cited

James Limburg. 1992. "Psalms, Book of." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol 5. ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday.