

Old Testament Survey—Psalms

The Psalms have meant a great deal to the people of God throughout the years, including you, no doubt. The psalms help us put in words the desires and feelings that we have when we struggle to find words. They are inspired accounts of real people of God who called out to the Lord.

Discuss: What have the psalms meant in your life personally? Are there particular psalms which God has given a special place in your heart?

Before we actually look at the book itself, let's make some general observations concerning it. Let's go into the laboratory, and become scientists whose task it is to observe and analyze this book. What do you notice as you examine the book of Psalms?

Observations:

- The longest book in the Bible
- Divided into five book collections
- Some of the books have inscriptions, some do not.
- Very personal accounts; many record conversations of real people talking to
God
- Poetic (not laid out in block narrative, but in parallel, indented lines)
- Does not follow a chronological order (Moses, earliest, in Ps 90)
- Many of the psalms designed to be sung (as indicated in inscription)
- Various lengths (some very short--117; some very long--119)
- Various labels or titles in the inscriptions (A psalm of praise; a maskil; a song of
ascents; A prayer--102; etc)
- Hebrew letters recorded above sections in Psalm 119 (an acrostic)

Who wrote the book?

Name: It comes from the Greek word in the LXX meaning "to pluck or twang." The actual Hebrew title is *tehillim* which means "praises" or "songs of praise." God spoke through a variety of human authors.

- David (73)
- Asaph (12)

- Descendants of Korah (10)
- Solomon (2)
- Moses (1)
- Heman (1)
- Ethan (1)
- Many unknown

Note: Scholars are very uncertain about the historicity of the headings. Evidence suggests that most biblical headings were added after the psalms began to be circulated and translated in the last two centuries B.C. (LHB, 528).

When was the book written?

- Archer feels no psalms were written later than 500 B.C.
- Moses lived and wrote his psalm (90) in the 15th century B.C.
- The process of compilation stretched not more than 500 years (L.H.B.)

Why was the book written?

- The Psalter is the divine word spoken *in* rather than *to* man (Harrison, p. 1000).
- The Psalms were pictures of biblical faith for a people who had no copies of the Scriptures in their homes (L.H.B., p. 530).

The Psalms teach God's people how to worship, both in personal and corporate life. It is the Hebrew song book.

We have lost the sense, to a great degree, of our corporate relationship with God. What does that mean?

Discuss: To view the Christian life as simply "God and me" is deficient. Why?

The Old Testament (and New Testament for that matter) underscore the fact that God's people are in a covenant relationship with God and *with each other*. A worship service is not just a "me and God" meeting, but "us and God."

God structured right into the calendar of the Israelites reminders of this. They had feasts and fasts on scheduled, yearly occasions, at which times they gathered together to remember and relive God's past victories for His people. The Psalms helped guide them in these worship times in the temple.

Discuss: What are some factors in contemporary worship that hinder us from experiencing the sense of community in our public worship?

Sitting on pews, looking at the back of someone's head (there were no pews in the temple?). Singing with our noses in the hymn books (they had no hymn books in the temple; they learned to memorize).

What is the outline of the book?

Technically, there are no chapters in the book, for the Psalter is a collection of individual "psalms" arranged into five "books." Hence, we do not say, "Turn to Psalm chapter 5," but "Turn to the fifth psalm."

Why are there five "books"? The best explanation of this grouping is that the various sections may represent stages in the process of collection, a process which stretched out over more than 500 years. Five books were formed, probably following the pattern of the Pentateuch. In fact, the number of psalms follows closely the number of sections into which the Pentateuch is divided for reading in the synagogue (153) (LHB, 511).

The Structure: The Psalms are composed of five "books":

Book I -- Psalms 1-41

Book II -- Psalms 42-72

Book III -- Psalms 73-89

Book IV -- Psalms 90-106

Book V -- Psalms 107-150

Each of the books ends with a doxology (41:13; 72:18; 89:52; 106:48; and 150).

Psalm Types: (LHB, 529) Various words are used in the headings which indicate the variety of the psalms:

1. Psalm (*mizmor*) -- used more than 50 times; seems to be a technical term describing a song to be used in worship accompanied by stringed instruments
2. Song (*sir*) -- used of 30 psalms
3. *Miktam* (atonement?) -- describes 6 psalms; meaning uncertain
4. Prayer (*tevilla*) -- used 5 times; denotes a psalm of complaint
5. *Maskil* -- used with 13 psalms; means "for instruction," or "for contemplation"
6. Song of Ascents (120-136) -- used in the processional of ascent to the temple
7. Praise (*tehillah*) -- used in Ps 145
8. *Siggayon* -- meaning uncertain; used in Ps 7

What is the message of the book in one sentence?

The book of Psalms shows us how to respond as persons to our personal God Who has redeemed us.

The Psalms express the essence of the blessed life.

See: Psalm 1--the introduction to the psalms

Q: What type of person does God bless?

- a. The person who doesn't live life like others (1).
- b. The person whose life revolves around the Law of God (2).

What contribution does the book make to biblical theology (that is, how does this book relate to the rest of the Bible)?

1. The Psalms are pictures of biblical faith.

Note: The Psalms, along with Isaiah, is the book most frequently cited by Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament. The Psalms can teach us how to have a close walk with the Lord. They teach us how to be *real* in our relationship with God.

Discuss: What does it mean to be "real" with God? How can the Psalms help us to learn to be real with the Lord?

Examples: What type of feelings are the psalmists expressing in the following...

3:1 "O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!"

Feelings of fear, alarm, of being overwhelmed

6:1 "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath."

Feelings of helplessness

45:1 "My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king."

Feelings of excitement and anticipation

51:1 "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love...blot out my transgressions."

Feelings of guilt

62:1 "My soul finds rest in God alone."

Feelings of trust and confidence

68:1 "May God arise, may his enemies be scattered."

Feelings of righteous indignation

69:1 "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck."

Feelings of despair and desperation

74:1 "Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?"

Feelings of confusion and questioning and abandonment

2. *The Psalms teach us how to experience intimacy in our relationship with God.*

G. von Rad subtitles the section of his *Old Testament Theology* on the psalms and wisdom literature as "Israel's Answer." The Psalms record the appropriate response of God's people to God's gracious acts in their behalf throughout history.

The psalms are quoted by God's people throughout the Bible. For example

a. Jonah, while inside the fish, prays and makes reference to several phrases from the psalms--18:6; 86:13; 88:6; 31:22; etc.

b. Jesus and the disciples sang a "hymn" after Passover (Mt 26:30).