

# PSALMS

FOR BEGINNERS

MIKE MAZZALONGO

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## **THE "FOR BEGINNERS" SERIES**

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14998 E. Reno

Choctaw, Oklahoma 73020

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

This book is a beginner's guide to the study of the book of Psalms. The approach we will use is as follows:

1. We will review the general history, background and various authors who contributed the 150 individual psalms contained in the book of Psalms.
2. We will examine the technical information and literary devices that make Hebrew poetry unique.
3. The book of Psalms has nine different categories of psalms, and we will look at each type and focus on one specific psalm from each group for further analysis.

The main objectives of this study are that you know the history and background of this Old Testament book, appreciate the distinctive style of Hebrew poetry, and recognize the differences between the nine different types of psalms. Hopefully, because of this increased understanding, you will be able to draw greater and more meaningful insights from this beautiful and inspiring book.

## TITLE

"Tehillim" is Hebrew for praises. The Greek translation of this Hebrew word is "Psalmoi." The English word Psalms is an Anglicized version of the Greek word "Psalmoi." The Psalms have a universal quality in that they offer the reader comfort without the necessity of critical understanding. In other words, you do not have to be a scholar or need to understand Jewish history in order to appreciate them. This being said, the Book of Psalms also presents the modern reader with a paradox. This contradiction is best stated with the question: How could a book that comes from such a narrow-minded culture with its complex and exclusive religious tradition have such universal appeal? One answer could be that the Psalms speak to every area of the human experience, need and condition. For example:

- The heightened sense of worship presented in many of the psalms satisfies the basic need in all people to seek God.
- In general, the Psalms present a people who were bold in prayer and had an intimate relationship with God during a time when this was not the norm.
- The attitude of theological certainty in the presence and power of God, found in the Psalms, is appealing to the human spirit.
- The aesthetic form of the poetry itself appeals to all kinds of people. The beauty and grace evident in the Psalms are timeless (e.g. "the Lord is my shepherd..." Psalm 23:1 - written almost 3000 years ago resonates with people in every generation).

As Christians, we understand by faith that these things are so because the Psalms are God's work and were purposefully given to men and women with these features in mind, but non-believers find comfort, wisdom, and beauty in this ancient poetry as well.

## **AUTHORSHIP**

The Psalms were written by different writers, but the Holy Spirit is the author of this as well as every other book in the Bible (II Timothy 3:16). Quotations from the book of Psalms appear in the New Testament more times than any other Old Testament book (of the 287 quotations in the New Testament taken from the Old Testament, 116 of these are from Psalms).

There are 150 individual psalms in the book of Psalms, but there are more than 150 psalms contained in the Old Testament portion of the Bible. The present format of 150 represents a selection process from a larger number of psalms available and brought together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Originally, psalms or praises were gathered into small collections arranged by the similarity of themes, catchwords, phrases, types and forms. We understand that this is how the book of Psalms was developed for several reasons:

- Psalm 72:20 says that David's psalms are ended, but later on in Psalms 86, 101, 103 and 108 there are more psalms referring to David. This suggests that two collections were combined and the smaller was included with the larger.
- There are doublets or duplicate psalms in and out of the book of Psalms. Psalms 14 and 53 are similar, and 105:1-15 and I Chronicles 16:8-22 are also similar. This means

that different groups had various collections and when they were put together, the duplicates became evident.

- We recognize that short sets were used for special purposes. For example, Psalms 113-118 are called the Hallel (Hebrew word for praise) psalms because they begin and end with the words "praise the Lord" and sung at the three great Jewish festivals of Dedication, New Moon, and Passover (the Hallel psalms are what Jesus sang with the Apostles at the last supper - Matthew 26:20). This was a separate smaller collection that was eventually placed within a larger one.

Some psalms were included in the book of Psalms and others were not. For example, Moses' song of deliverance (Exodus 15:1-18), Deborah's song of praise (Judges 5), David's lament over Saul and Johnathan (II Samuel 1:19-27), and Hezekiah's praise to God for delivering him from illness (Isaiah 38:9-20) are all psalms that were not in the actual book of Psalms. This process of selecting some and omitting others can be compared to John's statement in John 20:30-32 where he writes that only some of the events of Jesus' life were recorded to suit the purpose of the author (the Holy Spirit). In other words, of all the songs of praise and psalms written, some were recorded under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and included in various books throughout the Old Testament, and 150 of these were grouped together to form the book of Psalms itself.

The book of Psalms is divided into five sections. This was probably done to aid studying or to correspond to the five books of the Law. Before the end of each section there was a "doxology" (oral expression of praise). The five "books" were divided in the following way:

1. Psalm 1 - Psalm 41
2. Psalm 42 - Psalm 72
3. Psalm 73 - Psalm 89
4. Psalm 90 - Psalm 106
5. Psalm 107 - Psalm 150

The book of Psalms was written over a period of approximately 1000 years by a number of writers. Moses, who is credited with Psalm 90, is the earliest of the writers (1400 BC). David (1040 BC) is the most prolific in that Psalms 1- 41 are exclusively attributed to him as well as an additional 30 or so in the rest of the book of Psalms. Solomon (950 BC) is credited with two or possibly three psalms. Asaph, the sons of Korah, Ethan, Heman and other unknown writers from 900-400 BC are mentioned as the writers of the remaining psalms. The entire collection was included in the Old Testament canon as one single book containing 150 psalms 400 years before Jesus appeared.

## **USE OF THE PSALMS**

The book of Psalms was considered and used as the "Jewish songbook" in Old Testament times. It was used in temple worship, synagogue prayer and praise, and at home as a hymnal and guide for devotional purposes. It also served in the early church in much the same way. Later on, Martin Luther used the book of Psalms in restoring congregational singing in early Protestant churches. Many versions of the songbook that we, in the Churches of Christ, use today contain as many as 126 songs originally taken from the Psalms.

The book of Psalms is a valuable book because of what it provides for the reader:

- It is effective in proving that the claims of Christ were accurately prophesied in the Old Testament (e.g. Luke 24:44).
- It enhances our prayer and devotional experience. The psalms help us to develop a pious vocabulary and spirit as we seek to offer acceptable worship to God.
- The Psalms expand our understanding and appreciation for God. They describe with wondrous praise God's power, glory, wisdom, and mercy.
- They deepen our knowledge of and relationship with Him, and help us understand the link between thanksgiving and contentment. Focusing on what we do not have leads to dissatisfaction. However, recognizing and giving thanks for what we do have creates and nourishes a sense of contentment and well-being in our souls. The Psalms serve us in this process by providing the language and understanding we need to effectively give thanks.
- The Psalms also teach us the godly response to sorrow, fear, discouragement, anger, disbelief, victory, and joy. They explore and explain believers' feelings as they relate to God and the world around them.

As you work your way through this book my hope is that you will learn to understand and use the language of prayer and praise given to us by God in order to equip every saint for the purpose of acceptable and edifying worship.

## 2. Hebrew Poetry

The title of the book of Psalms means to praise. It was written over a period of 1000 years by several writers with the earliest psalm recorded by Moses (Psalm 90), and the latest in 400 BC (Psalm 150). David wrote approximately 70 of the 150 psalms contained in this book.

The psalms were originally assembled in groups and booklets but eventually put together into the format we have today (150 psalms divided into five sections). These, however, do not include all the psalms that appear in the Old Testament. The psalms were used in Old Testament times as a Jewish hymnal, and many were sung to the accompaniment of instruments in David's time. It was later used in synagogue worship in this way during the time of Jesus and carried over into early Christian worship as well.

Psalms is the most quoted book in the New Testament. It contains many Messianic references and Jesus Himself confirmed

its Divine inspiration. For nearly 30 centuries it has had a universal and timeless appeal.

## OLD TESTAMENT STYLE OF WRITING

We usually concentrate on the content of the Old Testament, but rarely discuss the style in which that content was presented. Most of the Old Testament was written in poetic as opposed to narrative form. This is in line with what we know about the writings of other ancient civilizations of that era. Lyrical poetry is the earliest example of all literature as seen in early Egyptian and Babylonian cultures, thousands of years before Christ. It is the oldest form of written communication. In ancient Greece the poets sang their songs long before the philosophers and historians arrived on the scene. Among the early Germans and English, the art of poetic composition developed before the art of writing in prose. The earliest quotations from the Bible, for example, are in poetic form. Note that Lamech's boast, recorded in the book of Genesis, is both a song and poem.

<sup>23</sup> Lamech said to his wives,  
"Adah and Zillah,  
Listen to my voice,  
You wives of Lamech,  
Give heed to my speech,  
For I have killed a man for wounding me;  
And a boy for striking me;  
<sup>24</sup> If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."  
- Genesis 4:23-24

When we say poetry versus prose or narrative, we mean a style of writing that is distinguished from prose and narrative. Poetry expresses the emotional and imaginative character of the

writer's thoughts. Poetry has the power of imagination and relies on the emotional impact of its verse to convey ideas rather than simply recounting the story in facts. Poetry uses exalted diction, lofty ideas and noble expressions, thereby making the medium in which it communicates equally important to the content of its message. Having noted this about poetry in general, it is important to understand that one significant difference between ancient Hebrew poetry and much of English poetry is that the poetry of the Hebrews has rhythm of thought rather than the beat of syllables or a rhyming scheme.

Not all Hebrew poetry is contained in the Old Testament. I Kings 4:29-34 refers to 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs of Solomon. It also mentions ancient poetic collections like, "Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Numbers 21:14), "Book of Jashar" (Joshua 10:13).

So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, Until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies. Is it not written in the book of Jashar? And the sun stopped in the middle of the sky and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day.

- Joshua 10:13

What we do have, however, has been collected and preserved throughout the Old Testament under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We have 39 books in the Old Testament written mostly in poetic style as was the custom of writing in the days when this material was produced.

# CLASSIFICATION OF HEBREW POETRY

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Not all Hebrew poetry is written in the same style. Most poetry found in the Old Testament can be broken into two main categories:

## GNOMIC (KNOWLEDGE)

Knowledge or Wisdom poetry. These were works of thought and reflection; observations on the human condition and society. For example, Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are examples of Wisdom literature or poetry.

## LYRIC

The discovery that most of the Old Testament was written in poetic form was made in the 18th century by Bishop Robert Lowth (Treatise on Hebrew Poetry). This discovery helped scholars more accurately discern the meaning of the Old Testament writings. We can see the impact of Lowth's insight when reading different versions of the Bible. For example, the King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611, long before Lowth's demonstration that most of the Old Testament was in poetic form. Note the way Genesis 9:25-26 is presented in the King James Version of the Bible:

<sup>25</sup> So he said, "Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants  
He shall be to his brothers." <sup>26</sup> He also said, "Blessed be  
the Lord, The God of Shem; And let Canaan be his  
servant.

- Genesis 9:25-26 (KJV)

Note how the same verse in the New American Standard version is presented taking into consideration Lowth's 18th century discovery:

<sup>25</sup> So he said,  
"Cursed be Canaan;  
A servant of servants  
He shall be to his brothers."  
<sup>26</sup> He also said,  
"Blessed be the Lord,  
The God of Shem;  
And let Canaan be his servant."  
- Genesis 9:25-26 (NASV)

Another example of this change is seen in another verse from Genesis:

And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.  
- Genesis 24:60 (KJV)

Note the difference in the New American Standard Bible that allows for poetic form:

They blessed Rebekah and said to her,  
"May you, our sister,  
Become thousands of ten thousands,  
And may your descendants possess  
The gate of those who hate them."  
- Genesis 24:60 (NASB)

The term "lyric" comes from the word "lyre" which was a stringed instrument used by the Greeks. Lyric was a term used to describe poetry that was meant to be sung. Examples of these contained in the Old Testament are:

- **Psalms:** Praises.
- **Lamentations:** Mourning (Jeremiah and his book of Lamentations).
- **Blessings/Curses:** Forewarning of things to come based on attitudes. Noah (Genesis 9:25-26), Laban and his family blessing Rebekah (Genesis 24:60), Moses (Deuteronomy 33:1-29).
- **Tribal Songs:** Commemoration of special events in the history of a family. Song of Lamech (Genesis 4:23).
- **Mashals:** Lessons or parables. Samson's riddle (Judges 14:14).
- **Paeans:** In reference to some historical event. Songs of Victory. Moses at the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1-18).
- **Dirges:** Funeral songs. A common form of poetry. David's song at Saul and Johnathan's death (II Samuel 1:17-27).

Within each Old Testament book, we can find a variety of the aforementioned styles.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW POETRY

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## RHYTHM

Most scholars agree that there is rhythm in Hebrew poetry, but not the type of rhythm found in Western style poetry. As I mentioned earlier, the rhythm in Hebrew poetry does not follow the number of syllables but rather the pattern of ideas (I will explain this later on). Hebrew poetry was divided into lines and each line broken into two or more parts called "stichs" (pronounced "sticks"). Usually, two to three stichs with several words each. For example, Psalms 54:1-2; 19:7.

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God, by Your name,  
And vindicate me by Your power.

<sup>2</sup> Hear my prayer, O God;  
Give ear to the words of my mouth.

- Psalms 54:1-2

(Here, there are two lines and four stichs)

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;  
The testimony of the Lord is sure,  
making wise the simple.

- Psalms 19:7

(Here, there is one line and three stichs)

The stressed words in a stich might have a variable meter indicating where the emphasis should be in pronunciation (e.g. in Psalms 19:7 the stressed words would be: law, perfect, testimony, sure, wise).

## RHYME

There was no planned rhyme scheme in Hebrew poetry (a significant difference between this and much of Western poetry). When there was rhyme it occurred because of coincidence.

## DEVICES

Hebrew poetry used several devices to enhance its form and challenge the reader. For example:

### A. Assonance

Similar sounding words with different meanings. For example, in Jeremiah 1:11-12, the word for almond is "shaqued," while the word for watching is "shoqued."

<sup>11</sup> The word of the Lord came to me saying, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "I see a rod of an almond tree." <sup>12</sup> Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over My word to perform it."  
- Jeremiah 1:11-12

The idea here is that the almond tree is first to bud in the spring, and in the same way God is always first to see how people will react to Him. This similarity is highlighted by the device of assonance, where the two key words (almond and watching) sound alike. Assonance was a very subtle form of accentuation.

### B. Acrostic

Lines in a poem that began with the succeeding 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, the 22 verses in Psalm 25 form

an acrostic where every verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Another example is in Lamentations chapter 3. This section contains a triple acrostic in that the verses are arranged in such a way that they repeat the alphabet three times.

### **C. Parallelism**

Old Testament scholar Robert Lowth (1700's) discovered the use of this device, especially in the Psalms. Lowth realized that unlike Western poetry where the rhythm and beat were demonstrated in a poem by stressed words or rhyme (e.g. In Flander's Field the poppies grow, between the crosses row on row; War poem by John McCrae). Hebrew poetry, on the other hand, had a definite pattern of rhythm (not rhyme) between its ideas, especially in the book of Psalms.

By studying and comparing the Psalms, Lowth recognized that the authors purposefully rhymed their ideas, not their words. Further investigation showed that this important poetic device had been abandoned by Hebrew writers after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and this is why it had not been noticed until Lowth rediscovered it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Study by Lowth and others managed to catalogue six major types of this "rhyme of thought" which they called parallelism (the most important device in Old Testament lyrical poetry):

**1. Synonymous parallelism:** Saying the same thing but in different words in successive lines. This is the most common type of parallelism. Example - Psalms 119:1-4

<sup>1</sup> How blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk in the law of the Lord.

<sup>2</sup> How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,

Who seek Him with all their heart.  
<sup>3</sup> They also do no unrighteousness;  
They walk in His ways.  
<sup>4</sup> You have ordained Your precepts,  
That we should keep them diligently.

2. **Antithetic parallelism:** The second line contrasts the first line. Example - Psalms 30:5

For His anger is but for a moment,  
His favor is for a lifetime;  
Weeping may last for the night,  
But a shout of joy comes in the morning.

3. **Synthetic parallelism:** The second line completes or amplifies the first. Example - Psalms 2:5-6

<sup>5</sup> Then He will speak to them in His anger  
And terrify them in His fury,  
saying,  
<sup>6</sup> "But as for Me, I have installed My King  
Upon Zion, My holy mountain."

4. **Introverted parallelism:** The first and last line in a stanza are similar, as are the second and third. This is often referred to as Chiasmus or ABBA. Example - Proverbs 23:15-16

A - <sup>15</sup> My son, if your heart is wise,  
B - My own heart also will be glad;  
B - <sup>16</sup> And my inmost being will rejoice  
A - When your lips speak what is right.

5. **Climactic parallelism:** Stairlike, where one line picks up words from the previous line and builds as does the next. Example - Psalms 93:3

The floods have lifted up, O Lord,  
The floods have lifted up their voice,  
The floods lift up their pounding waves.

6. **Emblematic parallelism:** Lines that use "like" or "as" to compare ideas. Similar to a synonymous parallelism. Example - Psalms 103:12-13

<sup>12</sup> As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
<sup>13</sup> Just as a father has compassion on his children,  
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

The understanding of parallelism helps us better interpret the Psalms because we can know who the author is referring to when he speaks. For example, in Psalms 8:4, David uses synonymous parallelism in describing God's mercy in caring for human beings. David's reference to the "son of man" in the context of the psalm refers to a human being because in the first stich the writer refers to a human being with the term "man." This helps us understand that the term, "son of man" in the second stich also refers to a human being (and not God) because these two stichs are expressed as synonymous parallelism.

What is man that You take thought of him,  
And the son of man that You care for him?  
- Psalms 8:4

It is left to the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews to take this Scripture, and in the light of New Testament revelation, connect it to Christ (Hebrews 2:6-8).

<sup>6</sup> But one has testified somewhere, saying,  
"What is man, that You remember him? Or the son of  
man, that You are concerned about him? <sup>7</sup> "You have  
made him for a little while lower than the angels; You  
have crowned him with glory and honor, And have  
appointed him over the works of Your hands; <sup>8</sup> You  
have put all things in subjection under his feet."

## SUMMARY

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Most ancient writings are in poetic form as is the Old Testament. Old Testament poetry is divided into two main categories: Gnostic (wisdom) and Lyric (expressive, meant to be sung, helpful style for memorizing). Old Testament poetry has its own particular rhythm, no planned rhyme and uses a variety of devices: Assonance (similar sounding words with different meaning), Acrostics (verses beginning with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet), Parallelism (the comparing and balancing of thoughts in successive lines and verses). There are different types of parallelism, however synonymous parallelism is the most common form.

# 3.

## Wisdom Psalms

We have seen that the Old Testament, true to the writing form of the times, was mostly written as poetry and divided into two main categories: Gnostic (wisdom) and Lyric (expressive). The lyric poetry included a variety of styles: Lamentations was the poetry of mourning; mashals were lessons and parables; blessings and curses were lyrical verses outlining the rewards and punishments on those who obeyed or disobeyed God. The most familiar poetry was that of the psalms which were lyrical verses that expressed different emotions and thoughts of the authors as well as their prayers offered to God.

Various psalms were written throughout the Old Testament period by a number of writers. They were originally collected together according to themes, special words or occasions. Eventually, many of these were assembled into one major book with 150 selected psalms that were used by the Jews in their worship at both the temple and synagogue. This collection is what we refer to as the book of Psalms. It contains the psalms from writers as early as Moses (1400 BC), to writings dated after the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon (400 BC). Most

were written by David (70) and his contemporaries (Sons of Korah, Ethan, etc.).

Previously we examined the characteristics of the psalms. These were the literary devices that made them unique as poetry. They included things like assonance (similar sounding words with different meanings to highlight or contrast ideas), acrostics (psalms ordered with the use of the Hebrew alphabet), and parallelism (where ideas in one line of the psalm were either repeated, augmented or contrasted in another line for the purpose of highlighting them).

Beginning in this chapter we will look at the different subjects that the Psalms addressed and review several psalms from each group.

## MAJOR CATEGORIES

1. Wisdom
2. Nature
3. Words of God
4. Penitential
5. Worshiping
6. Suffering
7. Assurance
8. Praise
9. Royal

The first type we will examine are the wisdom psalms. These are didactic and practical in nature. They are usually short

summaries of experience common to wisdom. Wisdom psalms deal with the sovereignty of God and the character of the righteous, and how the pursuit of this righteousness leads to questions regarding deeper moral and spiritual issues.

The wisdom psalms themselves can be divided into three sub-categories:

## 1. EXPERIENCE OR PROVERBIAL PSALMS

These are "mashals" (Maskil), short pithy sayings of experience.

<sup>1</sup> Hear this, all peoples;  
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,  
<sup>2</sup> Both low and high,  
Rich and poor together.  
<sup>3</sup> My mouth will speak wisdom,  
And the meditation of my heart will be understanding.  
<sup>4</sup> I will incline my ear to a proverb;  
I will express my riddle on the harp.  
- Psalms 49:1-4

This psalm demonstrates the characteristic style of the wisdom writer in addressing the people.

<sup>1</sup> Listen, O my people, to my instruction;  
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
<sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings of old,  
<sup>3</sup> Which we have heard and known,  
And our fathers have told us.  
<sup>4</sup> We will not conceal them from their children,  
But tell to the generation to come the praises of the

Lord,  
And His strength and His wondrous works that He has  
done.

- Psalms 78:1-4

Note the similar beginning of this wisdom psalm. The remaining verses show how the people disregarded the wisdom offered and were punished for it.

<sup>1</sup> Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brothers to dwell together in unity!  
<sup>2</sup> It is like the precious oil upon the head,  
Coming down upon the beard, Even Aaron's beard,  
Coming down upon the edge of his robes.  
<sup>3</sup> It is like the dew of Hermon  
Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;  
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—life  
forever.

- Psalms 133

In this psalm we are offered an observation on the joys of fraternal harmony given by one who is wise. Aside from the subject it addresses, this psalm also serves an example of the wisdom expressed by one who is wise.

## 2. CHARACTER PSALMS

These are similar to "wisdom" psalms but written in a different style (usually longer). They often strive to answer the question, "How should a good man live before God?"

## PSALM 1

Called the "Threshold Psalm" because it begins the book of Psalms. It has been compared to the Sermon on the Mount. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm and it is a "character type" of wisdom psalm where the author contrasts two different ways of life in answering the question, "How does a man become godly and what will be his fate?"

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the  
counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
- Psalms 1:1

This section states the importance of knowing what to avoid in building up the character of the godly man. The godly man avoids the ideas, activities and company of sinners (rebellion and disobedient). Note the synonymous parallelism where each stich in the first line repeats the same basic idea, which is to avoid sinners.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
- Psalms 1:2

The godly man's food or nourishment is the Law (Word) of God. He fills himself with God's word. This is how and why an ordinary man becomes a godly man. Note the synonymous parallelism again where the same complete idea is repeated with different words in the two stichs of the same line.

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,  
Which yields its fruit in its season  
And its leaf does not wither;  
And in whatever he does, he prospers.  
- Psalms 1:3

The results of delighting and thinking on God's law:

- Access to a reservoir of nourishment for growth that is abundant and never ending.
- Productive because it is planted in a good place.
- Continually renewed.
- Blessed in all he does.

The man who is nourished by the Word is godly and produces spiritual fruit. Note the synthetic parallelism where each stich completes and amplifies the preceding line.

<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
- Psalms 1:4-5

The wretchedness and destiny of the wicked are now considered. In verse 4 he states that the wicked will not be able to stand the least adversity because they are rootless and faithless. In verse 5 we are told that they will not be able to stand the judgment and take their place with the godly.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will perish.

- Psalms 1:6

The final summation: God knows His own, He will punish the wicked and bless the godly. Note the antithetic parallelism in this verse where the second stich's idea is contrasted to the idea put forth in the first stich.

## PSALM 15

Another wisdom psalm in the "character" type where this time the question is, "Who is the worthy worshipper?"

O Lord, who may abide in Your tent?  
Who may dwell on Your holy hill?

- Psalms 15:1

The question posed is, "Who is the acceptable one in worship to God, and who is worthy to come before Him?" The tent and holy hill are the temple in Jerusalem or symbolically the presence of God. Verse 1 is an example of synonymous parallelism where the idea in the second verse is the same as the first but expressed in different words.

Verses 2-5 answer this question in positive and negative ways.

He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness,  
And speaks truth in his heart.

- Psalms 15:2

Positive way: The one who walks with integrity (rule of life, man of principle). The one whose works are righteous: actions done

according to God's will. A person whose heart is true and who speaks that truth, not a hypocrite.

He does not slander with his tongue,  
Nor does evil to his neighbor,  
Nor takes up a reproach against his friend;  
- Psalms 15:3

Negative way: One who does not slander others. This person's speech is prudent and exercises control of his tongue. He does no evil to a neighbor in that he does not seek to bring others down. He is careful not to distress his friends with careless talk about things they have done and since regretted.

In whose eyes a reprobate is despised,  
But who honors those who fear the Lord;  
He swears to his own hurt and does not change;  
- Psalms 15:4

Positive way: He hates the unrighteous and gives no honor to evil men. However, he gives favor to those who honor God. This person stands by his word even when doing so causes inconvenience or financial loss.

He does not put out his money at interest,  
Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.  
- Psalms 15:5a-5b

Negative way: He does not practice usury which is the taking advantage of the poor by charging them ruiness interest for financial loans (it was against the Law to lend to a fellow Israelite and charge them interest). The righteous man will not thwart the

process of justice or be induced to accept a bribe in order to injure the innocent.

He who does these things will never be shaken.  
- Psalms 15:5c

Summary statement: A person with such qualities will never be moved, and will be worthy of being and remaining in the presence of God. Note the contrasting and balancing of positive and negative ideas on the same theme in this character type of wisdom psalm.

### 3. ETHICAL PSALMS

A third type of wisdom psalm is the "ethical" psalm. These deal with the deeper problems of religion and ethics.

#### **PSALM 49**

This psalm asks the question, "If God is sovereign over all, why does He allow the wicked to prosper and escape penalties, while godly souls are denied success and happiness?" In the original complete psalm there are instructions to the choir for singing, and the author is one of the sons of Korah.

<sup>1</sup> Hear this, all peoples;  
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,  
<sup>2</sup> Both low and high, Rich and poor together.  
<sup>3</sup> My mouth will speak wisdom,  
And the meditation of my heart will be understanding.  
<sup>4</sup> I will incline my ear to a proverb;  
I will express my riddle on the harp.  
- Psalms 49:1-4

Note the typical opening for a wisdom psalm.

5 Why should I fear in days of adversity,  
When the iniquity of my foes surrounds me,  
6 Even those who trust in their wealth  
And boast in the abundance of their riches?  
- Psalms 49:5-6

The problem: Should a poor man be afraid when the rich man is against him? What about justice for the poor and the oppressed?

7 No man can by any means redeem his brother  
Or give to God a ransom for him—  
8 For the redemption of his soul is costly,  
And he should cease trying forever—  
9 That he should live on eternally,  
That he should not undergo decay.  
10 For he sees that even wise men die;  
The stupid and the senseless alike perish  
And leave their wealth to others.  
11 Their inner thought is that their houses are forever  
And their dwelling places to all generations;  
They have called their lands after their own names.  
12 But man in his pomp will not endure;  
He is like the beasts that perish.  
- Psalms 49:7-12

Part one of the answer is contained in verses 7-9: Wealth cannot bribe God when death comes. Verses 10-11: The author explains that everyone dies and the grave is the answer to those who sought to perpetuate themselves by giving their names to great estates. Verse 12: He claims that death is the great equalizer

because all men and beasts die alike. This is a partial answer, but not very comforting.

<sup>13</sup> This is the way of those who are foolish,  
And of those after them who approve their words.  
Selah.

<sup>14</sup> As sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
Death shall be their shepherd;  
And the upright shall rule over them in the morning,  
And their form shall be for Sheol to consume  
So that they have no habitation.

<sup>15</sup> But God will redeem my soul from the power of  
Sheol,  
For He will receive me. Selah.

- Psalms 49:13-15

Part two of the answer is given in verses 13-14: The real answer to the original question lies in what happens beyond the grave. The foolish (rich oppressors) will be led by death (shepherd) into Sheol, the place of suffering for the dead. Their wealth will no longer have power to save them in this place. Their money will not buy them out. In verse 15 the writer says that God will save the poor (righteous) man by providing a ransom to bring him out (God will pay the righteous man's way out of Sheol in order to be with Him).

<sup>16</sup> Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,  
When the glory of his house is increased;

<sup>17</sup> For when he dies he will carry nothing away;  
His glory will not descend after him.

<sup>18</sup> Though while he lives he congratulates himself—  
And though men praise you when you do well for  
yourself—

19 He shall go to the generation of his fathers;  
They will never see the light.

20 Man in his pomp, yet without understanding,  
Is like the beasts that perish.

- Psalms 49:16-20

The lessons are contained in verses 16-20: First, the knowledge of Sheol removes the luster of the rich man's wealth here. The darkness there is greater than the glory of one's wealth here. Secondly, a man who lives without considering the eternal salvation of his own soul (understanding) even though he is rich, famous or powerful, is no better than an animal because in the end they both perish (die without hope after the grave).

These are a sampling of the three types of wisdom Psalms: experience, character, ethical.

# 4.

## Nature Psalms

Most psalms are examples of lyrical poetry. The 150 psalms contained in the book of Psalms deal with different subject matter. These can be grouped into nine general categories.

In the previous chapter we studied the Wisdom psalms and the three sub-types in this category: experience (like proverbs, called mashals, maskil), character (answer the question, "How should the righteous man live?"), and ethical (answer the question, "Why?" or "What is right?").

There are many Psalms which comment on the greatness of God as creator of all things and the majestic results of His handiwork. These are referred to as Nature psalms.

so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

- Matthew 5:45

The Bible declares that God works for man's benefit through the things that He has created. In Genesis 2:2-3 it says that God "rested" from all His work, this does not mean He stopped altogether, but that He completed His initial creative activity. Since that time, however, He continues to bless man through what He has already made.

In Colossians 1:16, Paul says that everything was created by God through Christ, and in verse 17 he says that all these things are continuously "held together" by Him as well. This means that God retains a present active involvement in maintaining the universe and the life within it. If God actively maintains the creation through Christ, then our prayers for sustained or restored health, protection and blessing from the elements, for food and other necessities are not in vain but exactly in line with a God who controls everything in the universe and who hears prayers. This is the difference between divine providence (God working within the context and through His creation) and miracles (God working outside the norms of His creation). The Nature psalms celebrate the reality of God's creation and His continued activity within it.

## **PSALM 8**

The psalmist comments on God's greatness as it is displayed in His creation and man. He introduces these two manifestations of God's glory in verses 1-2.

O Lord, our Lord,  
How majestic is Your name in all the earth,  
Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!  
- Psalms 8:1

The two words "Lord" are not the same in Hebrew. The first "Lord" means Jehovah, God's name (I Am). The second "Lord" means sovereign lordship. The Lord's excellent character is witnessed to by the heavens as well as by the creation. To see the beauty of the creation is to see the greatness of God.

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength  
Because of Your adversaries,  
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.  
- Psalms 8:2

The second witness of God's glory is in the humble state of man, especially when, as a child, he recognizes and appreciates the handiwork of God. The simplicity of a child's understanding of God's creative work has the power to silence unbelievers, scoffers and opponents of revelation. This phenomena is seen in Matthew 21:15-16 where Jesus refers to this idea after the children witnessing His entry into Jerusalem begin to praise Him.

<sup>15</sup> But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became indignant <sup>16</sup> and said to Him, "Do You hear what these children are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself?'"

The author of the psalm in question now goes back to expand the idea of God's glory seen in the universe. This is done to establish a basis for further reference to man's position later on.

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your  
fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;  
- Psalms 8:3

Here, he reaffirms that the heavens, all of them, are the direct result of God's conscious creation. (Note the use of synonymous parallelism.)

Now the author goes back to expand the idea of the creation of man and how after the mighty heavens are created, God judged that man, who seems so small and insignificant in comparison, should be the crown of His creation. In this the author sees how glorious God truly is.

What is man that You take thought of him,  
And the son of man that You care for him?  
- Psalms 8:4

When the author sees the moon and stars and power of nature, and then looks at man he wonders out loud why God has a constant place in His mind for him. Man is so small and yet God constantly cares for him. Why?

Yet You have made him a little lower than God,  
And You crown him with glory and majesty!  
- Psalms 8:5

David answers his own question: man's greatness is found in the fact that in comparison to everything in nature, God has made man to resemble Himself more than any other thing great or small. Man's value is not in size, strength or power but in his resemblance to God. Nothing else in creation (whether in the

heavens or here on earth) has this position. This is man's glory and honor.

<sup>6</sup> You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;  
You have put all things under his feet,

<sup>7</sup> All sheep and oxen,  
And also the beasts of the field,

<sup>8</sup> The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,  
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

<sup>9</sup> O Lord, our Lord,  
How majestic is Your name in all the earth!

- Psalms 8:6-9

Man's glory and honor is attested to by the fact that he is the head of all creation. He is the frailest in creation but rules over it. Note, not to exploit creation for his own interest but to manage creation for God's glory. This total submission will ultimately be manifested when Christ comes (1 Corinthians 15:27-28). For the author, this is a wonderful paradox (that the fantastic and powerful creation which glorifies God is in subjection to its frailest member in whom is the image of God). This contrast is in itself a cause for praising the wisdom and greatness of God, and this he does in verse 9.

Note several interesting things about the construction of this psalm:

- Synonymous parallelism in verse 6.
- Synthetic parallelism in verses 7 and 8 (line completing previous ones).
- Verses 1 and 9 are similar (refrain in a song).

- The perfect balance of ideas: praise in verses 1-2, creation in verse 3, man in verses 4-5, creation and man in verses 6-8, praise in verse 9.

## PSALM 19

<sup>1</sup> The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
<sup>2</sup> Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.  
<sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.  
<sup>4</sup> Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world.  
In them He has placed a tent for the sun,  
<sup>5</sup> Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;  
It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.  
<sup>6</sup> Its rising is from one end of the heavens,  
And its circuit to the other end of them;  
And there is nothing hidden from its heat.  
<sup>7</sup> The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;  
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.  
<sup>8</sup> The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.  
<sup>9</sup> The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;  
The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.  
<sup>10</sup> They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;  
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

11 Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;  
In keeping them there is great reward.  
12 Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden  
faults.  
13 Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous  
sins;  
Let them not rule over me;  
Then I will be blameless,  
And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.  
14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my  
heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.  
- Psalms 19

This is an interesting psalm because it demonstrates two categories of Psalms in one single poem: a Nature psalm in verses 1-6, and a Word psalm in verses 7-14. The author is balancing two ideas in this poem in order to make one point. In verses 1-6 he shows that man can acquire knowledge of God through the physical universe and uses a Nature style psalm to say this.

In verses 7-14 he concludes that man can also acquire knowledge of God through instruction from the Law, and uses a Word type psalm here. His point is that one can know God from the physical or the moral realm and that without the light from the sun or the light from spiritual revelation, all life would fail.

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.  
- Psalms 19:1

Here he personifies the heavens as someone who is, by sheer presence, making a declaration about God's glory and power. Today we are able to count and measure the stars and so our awareness of them only magnifies this declaration (Jewish mathematics at that time could not count as far as we can with today's math).

Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.  
- Psalms 19:2

This declaration of glory goes on from day to night to the following day as each array of moon and stars is followed by the great sun in order to continue this declaration without ceasing. (Note the synthetic parallelism.)

<sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.  
<sup>4</sup> Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world.  
- Psalms 19:3-4b

The celestial bodies do not speak words or make any kind of noise we can hear but their witness is universal, everyone sees them and the message is the same for every language.

In them He has placed a tent for the sun,  
<sup>5</sup> Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;  
It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.  
<sup>6</sup> Its rising is from one end of the heavens,  
And its circuit to the other end of them;  
And there is nothing hidden from its heat.  
- Psalms 4c-6

The greatest of witnesses is the sun which the author says is like a bridegroom in his brilliance and beauty. The sun was not to be worshipped but rather a mighty witness each day, as it crossed the sky (tent), of God's presence and power, visible and needed by every creature.

This thought of light from the sun serves as a bridge to the next passage where the author describes the light that comes from Scripture.

## **SUMMARY AND LESSONS**

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Nature psalms usually point to the creation as a whole or some part of it as a witness to God's wisdom, greatness, and power. These psalms are excellent sources for:

- Examples of praise for God's creation.
- Scripture passages that are useful to demonstrate and confirm the idea of creation (that this is how this world came to be) and God's ongoing work within creation (it is necessary to pray for good crops, rain, protection, etc. The world is not just on autopilot).
- Scriptural reminders that the creation was brought into being for two main reasons: 1) To be a witness for the glory of God (that is why there are billions of stars). 2) A witness of what God has done to sustain man's physical life and well-being.

After the fall of man the creation became less of a witness. The negative physical effects of the world-wide flood on the earth during Noah's time, and man's poor stewardship of the

environment since has diminished the original glory of God's creation. However, we can still see God's presence in the mighty array of the heavens, and the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God has become for us the new witness of not only God's power but His eternal purpose as well.

# 5.

## Word Psalms

Most psalms can be categorized into one of nine different types. So far, we have studied:

1. Wisdom psalms which seek to define the character of a good man, life, or action in given situations.
2. Nature psalms which comment on the greatness of God as it is revealed through the completed act of creation and God's continued activity within it.

In this chapter, we will look at Word Psalms. These are psalms praising God for His special revelation to us through His Word.

Aside from the use of parallelism, authors also inserted multiple synonyms for the term, Word of God, as a device denoting reverence when writing about this topic.

## PSALM 19

<sup>7</sup> The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;  
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

<sup>8</sup> The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

<sup>9</sup> The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;  
The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.

<sup>10</sup> They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;  
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;  
In keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup> Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup> Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins;  
Let them not rule over me;  
Then I will be blameless,  
And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

We previously studied how David combined two types of psalms (Nature and Word) into one poem. In verses 1-6 of Psalm 19 he praises God for His wisdom in creating a world that gives testimony to His power and greatness, and then putting all of this into the hands of man, the weakest of His creation. The creating

of the heavens reveals His greatness and, in comparison, the creation of man, made in His image, reveals His character. That the vastness of heaven and earth are put into subjugation to human beings also shows that His wisdom is not at all like our own.

In verses 7-14 he continues to praise God for the way that He reveals and glorifies Himself, but this time he demonstrates how God does this through the giving of His Word. This section of the psalm is divided into two parts:

1. The description, value, and purpose of God's word (verses 7-11).
2. A prayer of petition (verses 12-14).

## **DESCRIPTIONS, VALUE, PURPOSE (7-11)**

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### **DESCRIPTION – VS. 7-9**

The author uses six synonyms to describe the Word of God.

1. **Law:** Commandments and rituals given by Moses in the Pentateuch/Torah.
2. **Testimony:** The things that the Word has spoken about (i.e. God, salvation, relationships, creation, etc.).
3. **Precepts:** Rules or guidelines.
4. **Commandments:** General principles that encompass everyone and, if violated, affect everyone ("Thou shalt not steal").

5. **Fear:** The thing that God's word produces, which is said to be the same thing as the Word itself (a literary device known as metonymy - i.e. the word "crown" in reference to the king himself). Fear also suggests the awe, reverence and religion produced by the Word.
6. **Judgments (ordinances):** The sum total of His word, the summary conclusions of what His word teaches.

## VALUE – VS. 7-10

The author describes the value and character of God's word and its preciousness for the one who accepts it.

1. **Perfect:** Means it is complete, lacking in nothing and exactly what God intended it to be.
2. **Sure:** Dependable, accomplishing what God wants.
3. **Right:** Comes from the Hebrew words "straight" or "well." The Word is pleasing because of its rightness or soundness.
4. **Pure:** No impurity, no mixture of falsehood and truth. It is clean and transparent.
5. **Clean:** No ugliness, contamination or deterioration.
6. **True:** The epitome of truth. Something tested, straight.
7. **Righteous:** It is without sin, totally acceptable.
8. **Precious:** More valuable than any material thing (e.g. gold was the most valuable commodity at that time).

9. **Pleasing:** More delightful than anything consumed (e.g. honey as example). It stays with you, changes you for good.

## **PURPOSE – VS. 7-11**

He gives the practical benefits derived from knowing and obeying God's word.

1. **Restores the Soul:** The Word accomplishes what it sets out to do in that it converts the soul. The person who knows and obeys is changed.
2. **Makes the Simple, Wise:** The Word is dependable, even the naive and simple can have confidence that it will give them wisdom and insight.
3. **Makes the Heart Rejoice:** The Word has the ability to cheer and encourage because it offers assurance and comfort.
4. **Enlightens Man's Eyes:** Man's sinful mind is cleansed and thus brought to understanding through the pure Word.
5. **Provides Assurance:** Not only the Word but what we learn from it has permanence. Whatever we know and are assured of in the Bible will always be.
6. **Provides Protection:** The Word provides protection from spiritual death as well as physical dangers by warning of the destructiveness and repercussions of certain actions and attitudes.

7. **Provides Encouragement:** The Word warns but it also promises and describes the rewards awaiting those who believe and obey what it says.

The author proclaims the greatness of God by using various synonyms to describe His word. In addition to this, he details the Word's value and characteristics as well as what it accomplishes in the life of one who believes and obeys it.

## **PRAYER OF PETITION – VS. 12-14**

In the final two verses the author asks God to help him make a proper response to the Word. In this section he asks three things:

In verse 12, he asks God to forgive or clear him from hidden faults. At first he acknowledges that because he is human, he is not always able to know how he is sinning and going against God's word (only the Christian believer today can pray this kind of prayer because he is under the state of grace and as such is not subject to the condemnation of the Law that charges a person with disobeying the whole Law for an infraction against a single precept - James 2:10).

In verse 13, David asks God to restrain him from committing presumptuous sins. These are sins that he commits knowingly because of rebellion, selfishness, passion, weakness, but not because of ignorance. The Lord does not stop us from these but through His word, our conscience, the Holy Spirit and the church, He can alert us to danger. David also appeals to the Lord for help in not becoming a slave to desire or weakness and thus sin openly against Him. He knew the danger of these and the need to be free from any enslavement to these kinds of sins. (Note the synonymous parallelism in verse 13, stich 1-2/3-4.)

In verses 14, He prays that God will accept the psalm that he is writing and offering to Him. He begins his poem by describing the quality and purpose of God's words, and how precious and productive they are to him. He then ends by asking that his own words be acceptable to God. Again, a balance of ideas: God's words to him/his words to God. David finishes with a declaration that God is:

1. **His Rock:** dependable, solid, indestructible (strength).
2. **His Redeemer:** This term had two references among the Jewish people. A) Kinsman Redeemer. A relative that had the responsibility to act on behalf of another relative who was in trouble, danger or in need (e.g. Boaz - Book of Ruth). B) Avenger of Blood. This was also a relative who was responsible for avenging the murder of a relative (Deuteronomy 19:4-7;11-13). Ultimately, God is our Avenger of Blood who will carry out justice against those who have injured us (Romans 12:19), and He is our Kinsman Redeemer because He has paid our debt of sin through the cross of Christ (Romans 4:25).

## PSALM 119

This is the longest psalm in the Book of Psalms, and the longest chapter in the Bible. This psalm is an "acrostic" because the first letter of the first line and every eighth line thereafter begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (22 letters x 8 lines = 176 total lines/verses).

There is no progression of thought, but rather a general theme throughout: praise for God's word. This psalm uses 10 different synonyms for the Word of God (five of which are found in Psalms

19): Law, Testimonies, Ways, Statues, Commandments, Ordinances, Word, Precepts, Promises, Judgments.

There is a synonym for the Word in almost every line. Line (verse) 105 of this psalm is probably the best known and it summarizes well the overall theme the writer had in mind.

Your word is a lamp to my feet  
And a light to my path.  
- Psalms 119:105

Word psalms are meditations, and they express praise and appreciation for the value and character of God's revealed Word to man.

## 6.

# Penitential Psalms

Penitential psalms are expressions of individual lament that at times include a confession of sin on the part of the psalmist. They are psalms where the author sees that his own sins have contributed to the problems that he is facing (e.g. illness, enemies, punishment, etc.) and therefore asks God to remove these as he seeks forgiveness. In the Penitential psalms where this is the case, the author readily admits that God is a God of mercy and kindness. The term "steadfast love" is often used in reference to that quality in God's nature that continues to love and bless without regard to the response from the sinner. It is the kind of love that God extends while we are separated from Him by sin, indifference, or ignorance. God's steadfast love is the reason why we should come to Him with confidence, even when we are guilty of sin.

In some of the Penitential psalms the writer declares that he has to suffer in spite of his innocence, and asks God for a reprieve. In

one psalm the author challenges God to curse him if he is not found to be innocent (Psalms 7:3-5, similar to Job).

The Penitential psalms usually follow a script or set format:

1. A cry for help (healing, forgiveness, rescue).
2. A statement of condition (about health or danger).
3. An appeal for help renewed in specific terms (better health, destruction of enemy, cleansing).

Although some psalms see the author as an innocent victim, most Penitential psalms recognize the relationship between the sins of the author and the sufferings that he is experiencing. These psalms are appeals to a forgiving God for removal of sins and the problems attached to them.

## **PENITENTIAL PSALMS: EXAMPLES**

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### **PSALM 6 - A CRY FROM A SICK MAN**

<sup>1</sup> O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,  
Nor chasten me in Your wrath.  
<sup>2</sup> Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am pining away;  
Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are dismayed.  
<sup>3</sup> And my soul is greatly dismayed;  
But You, O Lord—how long?  
<sup>4</sup> Return, O Lord, rescue my soul;  
Save me because of Your lovingkindness.  
<sup>5</sup> For there is no mention of You in death;  
In Sheol who will give You thanks?  
- Psalms 6:1-5

This psalm is a cry for help from a sick man. The expression "how long" occurs over 50 times in the Scriptures, 16 of these are in the psalms. This man sees his illness as a sign of God's displeasure with him and seeks forgiveness. He believes that he is dying and is afraid of dying with God as his enemy.

<sup>6</sup> I am weary with my sighing;  
Every night I make my bed swim,  
I dissolve my couch with my tears.  
<sup>7</sup> My eye has wasted away with grief;  
It has become old because of all my adversaries.  
- Psalms 6:6-7

He describes his weakened and sickly condition, and the mournful state of his soul (depressed, fearful, and sad).

<sup>8</sup> Depart from me, all you who do iniquity,  
For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.  
<sup>9</sup> The Lord has heard my supplication,  
The Lord receives my prayer.  
<sup>10</sup> All my enemies will be ashamed and greatly  
dismayed;  
They shall turn back, they will suddenly be ashamed.  
- Psalms 6:8-10

At some point he realizes that God has heard his prayer. He may have been asking for a sign that his prayer was heard (some kind of reassurance or healing) and now has confidence that God has not turned His back on him. The author's enemies previously rejoiced in his illness and charged him with some kind of wrongdoing as the cause. Now that he has been vindicated, however, they will be ashamed for having falsely accused him.

## PSALM 143 - A PRAYER FOR DELIVERANCE FROM ENEMIES

<sup>1</sup> Hear my prayer, O Lord,  
Give ear to my supplications!  
Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness!  
<sup>2</sup> And do not enter into judgment with Your servant,  
For in Your sight no man living is righteous.  
- Psalms 143:1-2

This is a psalm of David and in it we witness this great king's humble cry for help. There is an acknowledgement of unworthiness and a request for a merciful hearing despite this.

The primary lesson that this psalm teaches us is that we can always appeal to God for help, despite our failings, because His willingness to hear our prayers is not based on our righteousness. God listens to our pleadings because He is kind, merciful and willing to hear us.

<sup>3</sup> For the enemy has persecuted my soul;  
He has crushed my life to the ground;  
He has made me dwell in dark places, like those who  
have long been dead.  
<sup>4</sup> Therefore my spirit is overwhelmed within me;  
My heart is appalled within me.  
- Psalms 143:3-4

The psalmist explains that he is surrounded by the enemy, crushed and defeated. He is discouraged, bordering on despair and his fear is about to overwhelm him. This psalm was written at a time when Saul, the first king of Israel, made many attempts to kill David in a desperate effort to thwart God's plan to remove him (Saul) as king and replace him with David.

<sup>5</sup> I remember the days of old;  
I meditate on all Your doings;  
I muse on the work of Your hands.  
<sup>6</sup> I stretch out my hands to You;  
My soul longs for You, as a parched land. Selah.  
- Psalms 143:5-6

David reflects on God's previous acts of mercy. He knows that God has helped him in the past (killing bears and lions to protect his flock as well as defeating the giant, Goliath - I Samuel 17), and can do so again.

Our faith is renewed when we remember how God has helped and rescued us in the past.

<sup>7</sup> Answer me quickly, O Lord, my spirit fails;  
Do not hide Your face from me,  
Or I will become like those who go down to the pit.  
<sup>8</sup> Let me hear Your lovingkindness in the morning;  
For I trust in You;  
Teach me the way in which I should walk;  
For to You I lift up my soul.  
<sup>9</sup> Deliver me, O Lord, from my enemies;  
I take refuge in You.  
<sup>10</sup> Teach me to do Your will,  
For You are my God;  
Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground.  
<sup>11</sup> For the sake of Your name, O Lord, revive me.  
In Your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble.  
<sup>12</sup> And in Your lovingkindness, cut off my enemies  
And destroy all those who afflict my soul,  
For I am Your servant.  
- Psalms 143:7-12

Here we see David's renewed appeals for deliverance. In verses 7-8, he asks that God's favor not be taken away from him. His is not only the fear of dying, but the fear of dying without God's favor. Verse 9 is an appeal for deliverance from physical enemies. Verse 10 is an appeal for the opportunity to serve God and obey Him. In verse 11, he makes an appeal for peace of mind and joy. Finally in verse 12, he appeals for the destruction of enemies.

## **PSALM 51 - A SINNER'S PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS**

This psalm was written as a result of David's affair with Bathsheba (David seduced one of his commander's wife and tried to cover the resulting pregnancy by having her husband deliberately killed - II Samuel 11). For a year David remained unrepentant but after he was confronted by the prophet Nathan concerning his sins, he poured out his heart before God in this Penitential psalm.

- 1 Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;  
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
And cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,  
And my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against You, You only, I have sinned  
And done what is evil in Your sight,  
So that You are justified when You speak  
And blameless when You judge.
- 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
And in sin my mother conceived me.
- 6 Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,  
And in the hidden part You will make me know

wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

<sup>8</sup> Make me to hear joy and gladness,  
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

<sup>9</sup> Hide Your face from my sins  
And blot out all my iniquities.

- Psalms 51:1-9

This is a strong cry for forgiveness. God has continued to love David despite his sins and this is what his appeal is based on. It is God's steadfast love that gives us the hope to even come before Him in order to ask for forgiveness. It was David's attitude of humility in acknowledging his personal guilt that allowed him to come before God despite his terrible sins.

Note the synonymous ideas for forgiveness contained in this psalm:

- Blot out transgressions - verse 1
- Wash me from iniquity/cleanse me from sin - verse 2
- Purify me - verse 7
- Hide Thy face from my sin - verse 9
- Create a clean heart - verse 10
- Do not cast me aside - verse 11
- Do not take the Holy Spirit from me - verse 11
- Restore my joy - verse 12
- Deliver me - verse 14

Note also that verse 5 has been used by some theologians (e.g. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 354-430 AD) to sustain the idea of "original sin," however, the Old Testament writers never speculated on the origin of sin, only on the fact that it was an ever present companion of man's nature. David acknowledges that he has been a sinner all of his life. He was a sinner and his mother, when she gave birth, was also a sinner.

In his cry for forgiveness David acknowledges that he is and has always been a sinner, and in the matter with Bathsheba is responsible for sinning grievously against God, and God is justified in judging and condemning him. David cries out to the Lord for forgiveness and cleansing because he knows that God has a gracious and forgiving nature and wants him to be pure.

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.,  
<sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from Your presence  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.  
<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of Your salvation  
And sustain me with a willing spirit.  
- Psalms 51:10-12

Here, David states his condition and needs, the main one being a new and responsive heart that will desire to do God's will with enthusiasm (the problem in the first place). True repentance and acknowledgement of sin bring forgiveness, and forgiveness brings about this renewal and zeal to do God's will. We only hurt ourselves when we refuse to respond to God's Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,  
And sinners will be converted to You.  
<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, the God of

my salvation;

Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your  
righteousness.

<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,

That my mouth may declare Your praise.

<sup>16</sup> For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would  
give it;

You are not pleased with burnt offering.

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not  
despise.

- Psalms 51:13-17

The author makes resolutions for the kind of life he will lead when forgiven. He will teach other sinners about God's love and forgiveness (verse 13). He will praise God for His lovingkindness (verses 14-15). He will remain humble and obedient (verses 16-17).

<sup>18</sup> By Your favor do good to Zion;

Build the walls of Jerusalem.

<sup>19</sup> Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,

In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;

Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

- Psalms 51:18-19

Verses 18-19 were added by another author at a later date as a witness to returning exiles from foreign captivity (also guilty of spiritual adultery) that God's forgiveness was made evident by their restoration and return to Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of that city.

## PSALM 32 - A SINNER'S JOY AT BEING FORGIVEN

In Psalms 51 David made a promise to the Lord that he would spend the rest of his life telling others of God's salvation so that sinners might be converted. This psalm gives the account of that effort and retells the story of his restoration from a more intimate perspective.

<sup>1</sup> How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,  
Whose sin is covered!  
<sup>2</sup> How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not  
impute iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no deceit!  
- Psalms 32:1-2

David describes the blessedness of forgiveness. (Note the synonyms for the word forgiven: sin is covered, does not impute iniquity, there is no deceit.)

The writer proclaims that happiness is produced when there is knowledge that God has forgiven, will not condemn, has covered over to hide or excused his sins.

<sup>3</sup> When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted  
away  
Through my groaning all day long.  
<sup>4</sup> For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;  
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of  
summer. Selah.  
<sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did  
not hide;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord";

And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.  
- Psalms 32:3-5

Forgiveness is not granted or obtained by excusing or concealing sin. This, the author says, only brings about more guilt and illness. David acknowledges that forgiveness does not come by stubbornly denying guilt but through an open and humble admission of our wrongdoing. God's grace covers the sins we do not know about as well as the ones we do know and struggle with, but does not excuse the ones we know about and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge or let go.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found;  
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.

<sup>7</sup> You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble;  
You surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah.

<sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go;

I will counsel you with My eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup> Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding,

Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check,

Otherwise they will not come near to you.

<sup>10</sup> Many are the sorrows of the wicked,

But he who trusts in the Lord, lovingkindness shall surround him.

<sup>11</sup> Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones;  
And shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.

- Psalms 32:6-11

We should have confidence in prayer. God answers and protects all of those who call upon Him in prayer, but rejects those who are stubborn and refuse to come near. David illustrates the difference between these two by contrasting the person who is repentant with the one who remains unrepentant: the repentant person is teachable and comes near to God, the other (like a mule) needs to be subdued with harsher measures. Those who trust in God to forgive them will be rewarded not only with forgiveness but a renewed spirit and the accompanying joy as well, and those who do not repent will be surrounded with sorrow.

Forgiveness is a joyful thing but is only obtained through honest and humble acknowledgement of personal sin, and trust in a loving and merciful God.

## **SUMMARY**

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Penitential psalms were a personal cry to God for help in times of illness and trouble. The authors of these kinds of psalms recognized the relationship between their own sins and the troubles that they suffered, and consequently asked for forgiveness as well as relief from their particular trials. Forgiveness for the vilest of offenses was always possible from a loving and merciful God but required sincere repentance from a humble heart in order to be received.

The Penitential psalms had a format:

1. A cry for help.
2. A statement explaining the problem.
3. A renewed request for help throughout the psalm.

# 7.

## Worship Psalms

From the beginning of time God and man have always had a place where they met in order to carry on their relationship. For Adam and Eve it was the natural and informal setting of the Garden which reflected the open and free relationship that existed between themselves and their Creator. After they were expelled from this place because of sin, we see Adam's descendants approach God at the altar of sacrifice, still meeting with Him but never without a reminder that sin and death separated them.

Many centuries later Moses built the tabernacle in the desert according to God's instructions, and because of this God was now seen as dwelling among the people. The reminder of sin and death was still present but through the work of the priests who mediated sacrifices on behalf of the people, they did not have to search for Him, He was always among them. As the Israelites settled the Promised Land, they had a great desire to build a temple where a permanent meeting place between God and themselves could be established. King David first desired this and was intent on building a temple, but God prevented this plan because of his violent life (I Chronicles 22:6-9). It was given to Solomon, his son, to complete the task, and under his supervision

the glorious Temple in Jerusalem was finally built (approximately 931 BC).

The Temple represented many things to the Jews:

- The continual presence of God among the people.
- The affirmation that they were a chosen people (because God dwelt among them).
- A continual reminder that their sins were being dealt with by God.
- A confirmation that the throne of the king was legitimate and eternal. David established Jerusalem not only as the place where the king of Israel dwelt, but also where the Temple would be located thus creating a dual significance for this city in the minds of the people. The Temple's presence validated the throne and the throne's location confirmed the divine link between the king of Israel and the God of the Jewish people.

The Jews had seven major feasts throughout the year and the Temple was the focal point for these observances. Before the establishment of synagogues, the Temple in Jerusalem was the main location for celebration, worship, gathering and meeting with God. These feasts drew thousands of Jews from Israel as well as pilgrims from all over the world. For some it was an annual visit (e.g. Joseph and Mary - Luke 2:41-52), for others it was a once in a life-time event (Queen of Sheba - I Kings 10:1-13). Either way, the pilgrimage to the holy city was an exciting event and, as a result, many psalms were written about the experience of traveling to, or worshipping at, Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

Psalms that deal with this theme are called "worship psalms."

## PSALM 24

Psalm 24 combines a wisdom and worship psalm together in one poem. Verses 1-6 are written in the "wisdom" style and detail the character of the one who worships by asking the question, "Who is worthy to go and worship God?"

<sup>1</sup> The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,  
The world, and those who dwell in it.  
<sup>2</sup> For He has founded it upon the seas  
And established it upon the rivers.  
- Psalms 24:1-2

David begins by establishing God's sovereignty and position as creator.

<sup>3</sup> Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?  
And who may stand in His holy place?

Here, the main question is posed: "Who may go up to the city, and meet with God, and worship Him in the Holy place?" *Ascend the hill/stand in the Holy Place* (note the synonymous parallelism).

<sup>4</sup> He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood  
And has not sworn deceitfully.

The answer given is that one who is holy and sincere is worthy to do this: holy in his works (hands), holy in thoughts (heart), sincere towards God (not lifted up his soul to falsehood), sincere towards man (not sworn deceitfully).

<sup>5</sup> He shall receive a blessing from the Lord  
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

This person will be considered righteous before God, this will be his blessing from the God that saves him. This righteousness is what enables one to stand before or worship God (at the Temple).

<sup>6</sup> This is the generation of those who seek Him,  
Who seek Your face—even Jacob. Selah.

These are the kinds of people that want to come and worship God. They are Jacob's sons (by implication true sons of Abraham and recipients of the promise given to him by God - Genesis 12:1-3).

The balance of this psalm (verses 7-10) is a worship psalm. It uses an antiphonal style (response type song) between singers who were positioned at the entrance of the city when David brought the Ark to rest in Jerusalem (II Samuel 6:12-15).

<sup>7</sup> Lift up your heads, O gates,  
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,  
That the King of glory may come in!

The first group approach the city gates and sing out to the sentries inside to open the gates and let the Lord (Ark) enter the city.

<sup>8a</sup> Who is the King of glory?

The response from inside asks the question, "Who is this king? Is it David?"

8b The Lord strong and mighty,  
The Lord mighty in battle.

The Lord is the king of glory, He is the one who provides strength in battle and victory.

9 Lift up your heads, O gates,  
And lift them up, O ancient doors,  
That the King of glory may come in!

A repetition of the original question.

10a Who is this King of glory?

Response.

10b The Lord of hosts,  
He is the King of glory. Selah.

Confirmation that the Lord of Hosts (a divine title) is the King of glory who seeks to enter in.

The word "Selah" appears 71 times in the book of Psalms but its exact meaning is not known. Most scholars believe it is an instruction for the reader to pause and reflect on what has been written, others think it may be a musical instruction for the singers.

This psalm not only praises God but is descriptive of the type of activity surrounding worship in a historical setting. It was used for a special worship occasion (music especially designed for the occasion).

## PSALM 84

Psalm 84 is considered a most excellent example of a worship psalm. There is a difference of opinion as to the occasion of its writing. Some say the author was prevented from going on a pilgrimage and is thus recalling a previous one with delight. Others say that the author is describing his joy and experience based on his current visit to the Temple. Despite the uncertainty concerning the circumstances in which it was written, this psalm succeeds in describing the particular joy this pilgrim feels as he visits and worships at the Temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>1</sup> How lovely are Your dwelling places,  
O Lord of hosts!  
<sup>2</sup> My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the  
Lord;  
My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

The author longs to arrive and be at the place where he can worship God. His desire is not necessarily for the place itself, but for the experience of being in the presence of the Lord there.

<sup>3</sup> The bird also has found a house,  
And the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay  
her young,  
Even Your altars, O Lord of hosts,  
My King and my God.  
<sup>4</sup> How blessed are those who dwell in Your house!  
They are ever praising You. Selah.

He contemplates the joy of those (great and small) who find safety in these surroundings. The birds make nests in the corners and cracks, the sinners make atonement for their misdeeds on

the altars. Each finding a place and way to belong and be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> How blessed is the man whose strength is in You,  
In whose heart are the highways to Zion!

<sup>6</sup> Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a  
spring;

The early rain also covers it with blessings.

<sup>7</sup> They go from strength to strength,  
Every one of them appears before God in Zion.

He thinks about the difficulties of the trip and considers them small in comparison to the joy of arriving and being in the presence of God. He mentions the valley of Baca (valley of weeping or tears) which was a dry stretch of land on the way where no water could be found. This and other obstacles on the journey simply helped him become stronger the closer he approached his destination.

Believers have a similar experience as they draw nearer to God. They find the strength to overcome difficulties that eventually seem insignificant when compared to the joy awaiting them in the presence of the Lord.

<sup>8</sup> O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
Give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah.

<sup>9</sup> Behold our shield, O God,  
And look upon the face of Your anointed.

The pilgrim now makes his prayer and petition. This is where the device of parallelism helps us to understand the true meaning intended by the author. In verse 9a he asks God to behold (meaning to bless or protect) the shield of the people. In verse 9b

he asks God to look upon (meaning bless or protect) the face of the anointed one (the one that God has anointed). This is a reference to the king. He is the shield (protector) of the people, and the one anointed by God for this task. Verse 8 and 9 are both examples of synonymous parallelism: one repeating the address to God, and the other repeating the request of God.

Therefore, the pilgrim prays for blessing and protection of the king (the Lord's anointed) since it is through his agency that the pilgrim can travel the land and come safely to worship. The king (anointed one) is a shield (protector) for the people (i.e. I Timothy 2:1-2). There is also a parallel Messianic image here as well: Jesus, our Messiah (Anointed One) is both our king and our shield (protector).

<sup>10</sup> For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside.

I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God

Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

<sup>11</sup> For the Lord God is a sun and shield;

The Lord gives grace and glory;

No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

<sup>12</sup> O Lord of hosts,

How blessed is the man who trusts in You!

The pilgrim finishes his psalm with praise for the One who is the occupant of the Temple, the reason why the pilgrimage is joyful, satisfying and possible. He praises God because: the Lord is a shield; the Lord is a sun and a light to his way; the Lord blesses the righteous; the man who trusts in the Lord is truly a happy man.

The author completes his psalm by reflecting on why he, himself, is full of joy: he is a man who trusts in God and is reaping the rewards of this trust.

## PSALM 122

This is another pilgrim's song that describes the feeling one has as he comes to Jerusalem and the Temple.

<sup>1</sup> I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord."  
<sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing  
Within your gates, O Jerusalem,

Here the writer describes both the feelings of anticipation and joy he feels when he prepares to travel to and when he finally arrives at the destination of his pilgrimage.

<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem, that is built  
As a city that is compact together;  
<sup>4</sup> To which the tribes go up, even the tribes of the  
Lord—  
An ordinance for Israel—  
To give thanks to the name of the Lord.  
<sup>5</sup> For there thrones were set for judgment,  
The thrones of the house of David.

He marvels at the meaning, layout and history of the city. He contemplates the beauty of the Temple and the significance of the activity going on there (ministry of the priests offering sacrifices, etc.). His prayer gives thanks for the history and rulership that has come from this city beginning with David, and according to God's promise, will go on forever. For this man,

Jerusalem is the eternal city of God and he is in awe of it when he finally arrives at the destination of his pilgrimage.

<sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May they prosper who love you.

<sup>7</sup> “May peace be within your walls,  
And prosperity within your palaces.”

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my brothers and my friends,  
I will now say, “May peace be within you.”

<sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,  
I will seek your good.

He came with the intention of praying and rejoicing before God but is now moved to offer a blessing upon the city itself. He prays that peace will be over Jerusalem, and a blessing will be given to those who love and prosper it. He also deepens his own commitment to serve it (and by extension a commitment to serve the Lord Himself).

Here is a man who comes to the Temple with a glad heart and is moved by the presence of God to rededicate himself (much like “coming forward” that many Christians have done during a worship service). One overall lesson that we can draw from this psalm is that the impulse to rededicate ourselves and our lives to God is one we should experience when we are in the presence of the Lord, and one that all believers have had throughout the years.

# 8.

## Suffering Psalms

In our study of the Psalms, we must not lose sight of the fact that these writings are not merely religious poetry divided into various categories, but are also an inspired record of experiences that people have had in their relationship with God. For example, they contain:

- The questions that arise when a man recognizes that God is present and judging his life.
- The awe one feels when contemplating God's creation and the revelation that is given through His word.
- The relief felt by those who come before God to acknowledge and repent of their sins, and receive forgiveness.
- The joy for those who completely give themselves over to the worship of the true God.

There are times, however, when life is filled with hardships, calamities and death. In times such as these God wants His people to come to Him in prayer and petition. The Suffering

psalms were written during such periods and describe the troubles as well as the requests made to God by those whose lives were upended by adversities common to people in every generation and culture.

## TYPES OF SUFFERING PSALMS

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There are two main categories in the Suffering psalm type:

1. **General:** These describe, in a general way, the suffering common to mankind (illness, depression, loneliness, oppression, etc.). Some are like Wisdom psalms, asking the question, "Why?" Many times there are different lessons and ideas that overlap but are contained in the same psalm.
2. **Imprecatory** (from the Latin word meaning "to pray for"): These psalms call on God to curse and destroy the enemy who is responsible for sin or the suffering of the writer.

## GENERAL SUFFERING PSALMS

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### PSALMS 42 AND 43

Background: These two psalms are believed to have originally been one poem. In several Hebrew manuscripts they are joined together. Psalm 43 is the only poem in the second book of Psalms to lack a superscription, all the others have instructions except this one.

The theme for both is similar in that the author is grieved because he has been excluded from the sanctuary of the Lord.

Verses 42:5; 11; and 43:5 are the same and divide the two poems into three major stanzas, and thus can be studied as a whole poem in three parts with a single theme.

Apparently the author plays the lyre (43:4) and was accustomed to leading ceremonial processions to the Temple in Jerusalem on various holy days. For some reason he is now in hiding or has been imprisoned by his enemies in the northern part of the country (Mount Hermon) and longs for a return to the city and practice of worship there. His enemies, who are not believers, taunt him when he expresses these longings to them (42:3; 10). The writer's suffering is intensified because he thinks God has abandoned him (42:9). Despite this difficult situation, however, he continues to ask God for deliverance and a return to Jerusalem so that he can once again participate in worship.

#### **42:1-5 - Yearning and Regret**

<sup>1</sup> As the deer pants for the water brooks,  
So my soul pants for You, O God.  
<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;  
When shall I come and appear before God?  
<sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food day and night,  
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"  
<sup>4</sup> These things I remember and I pour out my soul  
within me.  
For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in  
procession to the house of God,  
With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude  
keeping festival.

In verses 1-4 he expresses his deep yearning for a return to his former activity in leading public worship. Note the imagery of his

soul's experience: frightened and breathless like a frightened deer, thirsty and parched needing refreshment.

<sup>5</sup> Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
And why have you become disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him  
For the help of His presence.

With the first use of the refrain, the author reflects on his suffering (talks to himself) and responds with an upsurge of faith and trust that God will indeed save him.

#### **42:6-11 - Dejection and Hope**

This section describes the struggle of faith caused by this man's suffering.

<sup>6</sup> O my God, my soul is in despair within me;  
Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan  
And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.  
<sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls;  
All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me.  
<sup>8</sup> The Lord will command His lovingkindness in the  
daytime;  
And His song will be with me in the night,  
A prayer to the God of my life.

His surroundings (the waterfalls and mountains) remind him of God's presence and power, but also how his troubles have flooded his life and overwhelmed him. Nevertheless, he continues to hope, trust and pray.

<sup>9</sup> I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me?  
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"  
<sup>10</sup> As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me,  
While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

He wonders why God allows his enemies to taunt him without response, "Has God forgotten me?" His natural struggle of faith is to think God does not know or care that his troubles seem larger and stronger than he is.

<sup>11</sup> Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
And why have you become disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,  
The help of my countenance and my God.

In this final refrain the author again reflects on his condition and again reaffirms his commitment to continue hoping despite the apparent evidence that God has abandoned him. He realizes that no one else can help him and only the Lord ("the help of my countenance") is His God.

### **43:1-5 - Confidence in God**

<sup>1</sup> Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation;  
O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man!  
<sup>2</sup> For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me?  
Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

Here, the poet calls on God to be his defender against his enemies. Perhaps, after a time of hesitation, he has now reluctantly put the entire responsibility for his salvation into the hands of God, his defender. Even though God is silent throughout his sufferings, the author is content to let the matter be with the Lord, contrary to his previous efforts of defending himself.

<sup>3</sup> O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me;  
Let them bring me to Your holy hill  
And to Your dwelling places.  
<sup>4</sup> Then I will go to the altar of God,  
To God my exceeding joy;  
And upon the lyre I shall praise You, O God, my God.

Here, the author repeats this idea in another way and adds one more thought. He calls upon God's wisdom, truth and power to rescue and return him to his former place of worship in Jerusalem. He not only asks to be returned to that physical place but to the very presence of God and the joy of that presence as well (this is like a Worship psalm here). It is in this state that he will be able to offer, once again, his praise to God as a man renewed in faith.

<sup>5</sup> Why are you in despair, O my soul?  
And why are you disturbed within me?  
Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him,  
The help of my countenance and my God.

He offers a third repetition of this refrain to end the poem (meant to be read with different tone). This psalm is about a man in trouble who is experiencing a crisis of faith and sharing his internal dialogue concerning these matters with his readers:

- In 43:5, his faith rebukes the hopelessness he feels at the suffering experienced and described in verses 1-4.
- In 42:11, his faith exhorts him to believe despite his bewilderment at God's silence during his suffering.
- In 43:5, his faith declares triumph over the present distress because he knows that God still rules and can save him no matter what.

These psalms teach us that continued faith during trials is what God requires of us and what gives us strength. Whether or not the trial ends before we die is of no importance, and yet the subject of much prayer (we want to get back to normal living as soon as possible). What is truly important and worthy of our petitions to God, however, is remaining faithful until we die, regardless of the state of our health or position until that time.

## IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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These are suffering psalms where the author boldly asks God to destroy his enemies. Many have problems with these psalms because they seem to contradict the spirit of love and forgiveness found in God's attitude towards men. Many who read these prayers ask, "How could God inspire men to say such things?"

### PSALM 58

This is a poem written as an inditement against false rulers and judges.

<sup>1</sup> Do you indeed speak righteousness, O gods?  
Do you judge uprightly, O sons of men?

<sup>2</sup> No, in heart you work unrighteousness;  
On earth you weigh out the violence of your hands.  
<sup>3</sup> The wicked are estranged from the womb;  
These who speak lies go astray from birth.  
<sup>4</sup> They have venom like the venom of a serpent;  
Like a deaf cobra that stops up its ear,  
<sup>5</sup> So that it does not hear the voice of charmers,  
Or a skillful caster of spells.

In these verses we see that the term "O gods" refers to men in rulership positions as judges, governors or kings. The writer claims that these leaders have been wicked, hypocritical, violent and unjust, and have been so all of their lives. He charges that nothing can stop their evil (e.g. a deaf snake cannot be tamed by a charmer), and they listen to no one including God Himself.

<sup>6</sup> O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth;  
Break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord.  
<sup>7</sup> Let them flow away like water that runs off;  
When he aims his arrows, let them be as headless shafts.  
<sup>8</sup> Let them be as a snail which melts away as it goes along,  
Like the miscarriages of a woman which never see the sun.  
<sup>9</sup> Before your pots can feel the fire of thorns  
He will sweep them away with a whirlwind, the green and the burning alike.

The imprecations or pleas for punishment of these people are made by describing six images of damage or suffering that the author urges God to inflict upon them:

1. Young lions that have their teeth torn out.

2. Water that is quickly eliminated after a downpour.
3. Broken arrows.
4. A snail that is drawn up into its shell.
5. A miscarriage.
6. Thorns that are quickly burned up when lighted under a cooking pot.

All of these thoughts carry with them the idea of quick and total destruction of these enemies.

<sup>10</sup> The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;

He will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

<sup>11</sup> And men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;

Surely there is a God who judges on earth!"

The author concludes that the righteous will rejoice when the wicked are destroyed. In addition to this, God through His judgment will be seen to be the true Judge, and the righteous who have suffered will have their faith in God and personal righteousness vindicated.

## **IMPRECATORY PSALMS IN LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

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In the New Testament we are taught to love our enemies, not to curse them, and to wait upon the vengeance of the Lord (Romans 12:19). How do we then explain the presence of such curses in the Bible? Here are some possible explanations:

1. These writings reflect the culture of a people who had not yet received the full gospel message but honestly portray their feelings at that time.
2. The Israelites identified sin with the sinner and so to destroy one meant to destroy the other. For example, Baal worship was destroyed when Baal worshippers were destroyed. Also, God had used Israel to bring judgment on the pagan tribes in the Promised Land and so it was natural to see judgment as something that God began here on earth.
3. In II Thessalonians, Paul uses a similar idea, "... for after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you." (II Thessalonians 1:6). The idea of God's judgment falling on the wicked and vindicating the righteous is a true one. However, in the Old Testament the language that this truth was couched in was more forceful and reflective of the culture, conditions and enlightenment of the people at that time.

# 9.

## Assurance Psalms

Many of the psalms and their categories describe the reaction that different people had when contemplating the experience produced by their relationship with God. For example:

1. Questions concerning conduct (wisdom).
2. Awe at God's creation and Word.
3. Joy while attending worship or being restored.

In some instances, the writers expressed their needs before God in times of difficulty and did so either through a listing of their troubles or by crying out for help (Suffering psalms). At other times they reflected on the sure presence of God during these moments and how He continually provided protection and guidance for His people.

The psalms that lift up God's name as protector and guide are called Assurance psalms.

## PSALMS 23

Psalms 23 is a classic Assurance psalm and also the best known of all the psalms contained in the entire Bible. It is timeless in its beauty, and its message is easily understood regardless of culture or age. It describes the type of assurance one has from God and uses two images of Him in the same poem: one as a shepherd and one as host.

### Shepherd

The picture of a shepherd was natural imagery for David to use since not only was he a shepherd, but he came from a people who had been shepherds for many generations. Jacob, as well as his father, Isaac, and grandfather, Abraham, were all shepherds and Jacob acknowledged this to the Egyptian Pharaoh when he and his family migrated there to join his son, Joseph (Genesis 47:3).

The shepherd's work was all encompassing since sheep were the most helpless of animals, unable to defend or care for themselves. Jewish shepherds were especially attentive in that they led their flocks by walking in front of them and did not "drive" them from the rear. They scouted grazing land for them, making sure that the grass was young and fresh, not dried up or filled with weeds and possible poison herbs. These shepherds brought them out in the morning, protected and watered them in the day, and led them back to the sheepfold at evening. Many slept in the doorway of the sheepfold to protect against nighttime intruders or thieves. Good shepherds literally lived with their flocks.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.

David, the shepherd from a nation of shepherds, declares that God is his shepherd and by extension fulfills this protective role with the nation as well. The word "Lord" here is the term "Jehovah" or God. It suggests the quality of the shepherd in that He is eternal, all powerful and capable of complete care for His flock. The metaphor of a shepherd as protector was a common one in those times. David states confidently that with the Lord as his shepherd, he will not be left wanting. His needs and the needs of all the flock will always be met by this great shepherd.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside quiet waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul;  
He guides me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow  
of death,  
I fear no evil, for You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

In the next few verses, David outlines some of the things that this great Shepherd does and will do for him.

- He will provide the things needed (pastures).
- He will provide peace of mind (still waters).
- He will provide regeneration (restore soul and righteousness - synonymous parallelism).

These things He will do by guiding him in the right ways to think, believe and act.

God will provide protection through life's problems. The "shadow of death" is not death itself but rather the fear of death

and signs of it we see in this fallen and sinful world. Even though I see these things and the shadow of death crosses over into my life, I will not fear because my shepherd will be there to protect and strengthen me.

The words "rod and staff" may be referring to the same thing but used in two ways (the literary device of metonymy - in this case substituting the words rod and staff for the single idea of God's "Word"). For example: the Word (rod) comforts with encouragement and assurance of God's love and mercy in the face of death; the Word (staff) also protects against false ideas and the attacks of the devil. This would have been easily recognizable to David's reading audience since the staff or rod used by shepherds had many uses. It served to direct the way the flock travelled, used to protect against other animals, functioned as a disciplinary tool punishing sheep who strayed and helped the shepherd keep count when the sheep were in their enclosure.

David sees God as his shepherd who provides, through His word, not only for his physical needs, but also guarantees peace of mind, salvation of his soul, protection against evil and support through life's difficult times.

## God as Host

David changes the imagery for God from protective shepherd to gracious host beginning in verse 5.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You have anointed my head with oil;  
My cup overflows.

The generous hosts of that era, as they are today, were anxious to please their guests. They did not see hospitality as a burden but as a gracious act that blessed their guests as well as their own households. In those days, however, the host provided not only the food, but also washed his guest's feet and provided him with ointment as a sign of welcome. In addition to this, the host was also responsible for the protection of his guest (this responsibility lasted as long as the food remained in the body: two days). With God as his host, David is presented with a feast (cup overflowing) and blessings (anointing) despite his enemies and problems (when we count our blessings we usually see that they outnumber our problems).

6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all  
the days of my life,  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

With God as his shepherd and host, David is assured that:

1. He will be blessed throughout his life, not necessarily with wealth or power but with the assurance that God's goodness and mercy will be evident to him in all that he sees (despite whatever trouble or danger he may encounter).
2. He adds a third image of assurance in the last line. To the idea of being a sheep in God's flock and a guest at His table, David adds that he will also live in God's house forever. Most writers spoke of visiting or worshipping (for a time) at the temple before God. David goes well beyond this familiar imagery by declaring that he would be a permanent dweller and be with God not only during a festival or Sabbath day, but remain with Him forever!

## PSALM 46

Here is a psalm that sees God as our refuge. Some say this (not 18) is the inspiration for the hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, written by Martin Luther.

This psalm is divided into three sections.

<sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
A very present help in trouble.  
<sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should  
change  
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the  
sea;  
<sup>3</sup> Though its waters roar and foam,  
Though the mountains quake at its swelling pride.  
Selah.

### **God is our refuge in life's gravest crises.**

The author describes cataclysmic natural events but says that despite these, one whose refuge is God will not be afraid.

<sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of  
God,  
The holy dwelling places of the Most High.  
<sup>5</sup> God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns.  
<sup>6</sup> The nations made an uproar, the kingdoms tottered;  
He raised His voice, the earth melted.  
<sup>7</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

## **God is our refuge in the presence of our immediate enemies.**

He describes Jerusalem as not only the place where God dwells with His people but also the target for attack by the enemy. The defender of the city who destroys the enemy is God Himself. The idea here being that those who are close to God will be successfully defended by God against any and all enemies.

<sup>8</sup> Come, behold the works of the Lord,  
Who has wrought desolations in the earth.  
<sup>9</sup> He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth;  
He breaks the bow and cuts the spear in two;  
He burns the chariots with fire.  
<sup>10</sup> "Cease striving and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in  
the earth."  
<sup>11</sup> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our stronghold. Selah.

## **God is our refuge among the nations.**

The author declares that not only does God protect from various enemies (political, moral, spiritual) but His victory serves as a sign to all the nations that they should cease rejecting God and His people, and come to the Lord. This psalm looks to a point beyond this world and into the next where the author sees God as the refuge against death itself. Note that verses 7 and 11 form a refrain which is repeated twice in the poem and refers to the threefold title of God. Who is this refuge for us?

1. The Lord of Hosts: His title of divine power.
2. The God of Jacob: His title of covenant relationship with Israel. The God in human history. Pagan gods had no

covenants with individuals. This is one significant way that Jehovah is different and differentiated from these pagan deities.

3. The Lord of Hosts is with us: Immanuel. This is His name and suggests the substance of His promise (protection and deliverance) and why we can feel assured.

In describing God in this psalm, the author is assured that the Lord is a refuge against life's catastrophes, enemies and death. This assurance is based on the recognition of His divine power, the historical proof of His love and the promise to always be with His people.

# 10.

## Praise Psalms

One of the interesting features of our study of the Psalms is learning about the various types of psalms there are. Most folks who only have a passing knowledge of them usually think that all Psalms are "praise" psalms, but we have learned that there are very different types or categories of psalms that include:

1. Wisdom Psalms
2. Nature Psalms
3. Word of God Psalms
4. Penitential Psalms
5. Worship Psalms
6. Suffering Psalms
7. Assurance Psalms
8. Praise Psalms
9. Royal Psalms

There are 21 praise-type psalms in the book of Psalms. Praise psalms are usually subdivided into two types:

## 1. Declarative-Type Praise Psalms

These include Psalms 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 66, 106, 116, 138. They are often referred to as "thanksgiving" or "Todah" Psalms (Todah = Hebrew for thanksgiving). Declarative praise psalms are further divided into two other groups:

- A. Praise of the individual
- B. Praise of the community

There is not a great difference between these, other than the single or plural identity of the ones offering the praise. For example:

### INDIVIDUAL

<sup>1</sup> "I love You, O Lord, my strength."  
<sup>2</sup> The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,  
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge;  
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.  
<sup>3</sup> I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,  
And I am saved from my enemies.  
- Psalms 18:1-3

### COMMUNAL

<sup>1</sup> Shout joyfully to God, all the earth;  
<sup>2</sup> Sing the glory of His name;

Make His praise glorious.

<sup>3</sup> Say to God, "How awesome are Your works!

Because of the greatness of Your power Your enemies  
will give feigned obedience to You.

<sup>4</sup> "All the earth will worship You,

And will sing praises to You;

They will sing praises to Your name." Selah.

- Psalms 66:1-4

Declarative praise psalms have the following elements:

## A PROCLAMATION TO PRAISE GOD

This type of Psalm begins with a clear intention to praise God. The Psalmist will tell what God has done. A vow to praise may have been made in private, but payment of that vow must be made in public. This type of psalm is a testimony.

<sup>1</sup> I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up,  
And have not let my enemies rejoice over me.

<sup>2</sup> O Lord my God,

I cried to You for help, and You healed me.

- Psalms 30:1-2

<sup>12</sup> What shall I render to the Lord

For all His benefits toward me?

<sup>13</sup> I shall lift up the cup of salvation

And call upon the name of the Lord.

<sup>14</sup> I shall pay my vows to the Lord,

Oh may it be in the presence of all His people.

- Psalms 116:12-14

## A REPORT OF DELIVERANCE

The praise is given first (e.g. ...I will praise...). The psalmist will then tell what God has done by looking back at His actions to save/deliver him. The usual pattern is:

- I cried out to God.
- He heard my cry.
- God drew me out, saved me.

Psalms 18:4-19 is an example of this.

<sup>4</sup> The cords of death encompassed me,  
And the torrents of ungodliness terrified me.  
<sup>5</sup> The cords of Sheol surrounded me;  
The snares of death confronted me.  
<sup>6</sup> In my distress I called upon the Lord,  
And cried to my God for help;  
He heard my voice out of His temple,  
And my cry for help before Him came into His ears.  
<sup>7</sup> Then the earth shook and quaked;  
And the foundations of the mountains were trembling  
And were shaken, because He was angry.  
<sup>8</sup> Smoke went up out of His nostrils,  
And fire from His mouth devoured;  
Coals were kindled by it.  
<sup>9</sup> He bowed the heavens also, and came down  
With thick darkness under His feet.  
<sup>10</sup> He rode upon a cherub and flew;  
And He sped upon the wings of the wind.  
<sup>11</sup> He made darkness His hiding place,

His canopy around Him, Darkness of waters, thick  
clouds of the skies.

<sup>12</sup> From the brightness before Him passed His thick  
clouds,

Hailstones and coals of fire.

<sup>13</sup> The Lord also thundered in the heavens,

And the Most High uttered His voice,

Hailstones and coals of fire.

<sup>14</sup> He sent out His arrows, and scattered them,

And lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them.

<sup>15</sup> Then the channels of water appeared,

And the foundations of the world were laid bare

At Your rebuke, O Lord,

At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils.

<sup>16</sup> He sent from on high, He took me;

He drew me out of many waters.

<sup>17</sup> He delivered me from my strong enemy,

And from those who hated me, for they were too  
mighty for me.

<sup>18</sup> They confronted me in the day of my calamity,

But the Lord was my stay.

<sup>19</sup> He brought me forth also into a broad place;

He rescued me, because He delighted in me.

## PRAISE OR A RENEWED VOW OF PRAISE

After reciting the works of God the author will then offer a  
renewal of praise and declaration of the many saving acts of God.

<sup>46</sup> The Lord lives, and blessed be my rock;

And exalted be the God of my salvation,

<sup>47</sup> The God who executes vengeance for me,

And subdues peoples under me.

<sup>48</sup> He delivers me from my enemies;  
Surely You lift me above those who rise up against me;  
You rescue me from the violent man.

<sup>49</sup> Therefore I will give thanks to You among the  
nations, O Lord,  
And I will sing praises to Your name.

<sup>50</sup> He gives great deliverance to His king,  
And shows lovingkindness to His anointed,  
To David and his descendants forever.

- Psalms 18:46-50

The fourth element found in declarative praise psalms,

## INSTRUCTION

The author will provide a teaching or exhortation based on his experience with God. Let's use Psalm 138 as an example.

### Intention to praise

<sup>1</sup> I will give You thanks with all my heart;  
I will sing praises to You before the gods.

<sup>2a</sup> I will bow down toward Your holy temple  
And give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness  
and Your truth;

### Reason for the praise

<sup>2b</sup> For You have magnified Your word according to all  
Your name.

<sup>3</sup> On the day I called, You answered me;  
You made me bold with strength in my soul.

God answered his prayer by strengthening his inward man, spirit, soul. David does not describe the danger or challenge that he faced, only the fact that, in his time of need, God provided him with the inner strength to face, endure or overcome what he was facing. The channel of this blessing or answered prayer was God's word. David praises God for strengthening him to face a real-world challenge by enlarging or deepening his understanding of His word in some way.

### **Vow and instruction**

<sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth will give thanks to You, O Lord,

When they have heard the words of Your mouth.

<sup>5</sup> And they will sing of the ways of the Lord,  
For great is the glory of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> For though the Lord is exalted,  
Yet He regards the lowly,  
But the haughty He knows from afar.

Others (kings) will also praise God because of His word. He makes a promise here to proclaim God's word to others so they can share in the blessings that come from knowing His word. An insight and teaching about God: He raises the humble and lowers the proud.

### **Renewed praise**

<sup>7</sup> Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
You will revive me;  
You will stretch forth Your hand against the wrath of  
my enemies,  
And Your right hand will save me.

<sup>8</sup> The Lord will accomplish what concerns me;  
Your lovingkindness, O Lord, is everlasting;  
Do not forsake the works of Your hands.

The author renews his confidence that what the Lord did for him in the past, he can do again in the future. In these final verses we get an idea of what provoked the author to go to God in prayer in the first place: the threat of enemies.

## 2. Descriptive-type Praise Psalms

These praise Psalms are similar to declarative praise Psalms, but have certain elements that set them apart. These include Psalms 28, 36, 105, 111, 113, 117, 135, 136, 146, 147. The main difference between these and declarative praise psalms is that they contain more information as to why the praise is given and what it is about God that draws the praise.

Descriptive praise Psalms contain the following elements:

### A. Prologue

A spontaneous expression of hallelujah or praise.

Praise the Lord!  
I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart,  
In the company of the upright and in the assembly.  
- Psalms 111:1

Praise the Lord!  
Praise, O servants of the Lord,  
Praise the name of the Lord.  
- Psalms 113:1

## **B. A call for others to praise**

This is also seen as a call to worship.

Praise the Lord, all nations;  
Laud Him, all peoples!  
- Psalms 117:1

Praise the Lord!  
Praise the name of the Lord;  
Praise Him, O servants of the Lord,  
- Psalms 135:1

## **C. The cause for the praise**

The main body of the psalm usually sets forth the reason(s) God is to be praised. The author usually puts forth a summary statement of the cause for worship and this is usually followed up by examples of it. The summary statement normally has two parts:

### **1. God's greatness (i.e. Lord of creation)**

<sup>2</sup> Great are the works of the Lord;  
They are studied by all who delight in them.  
<sup>3</sup> Splendid and majestic is His work,  
And His righteousness endures forever.  
<sup>4</sup> He has made His wonders to be remembered;  
The Lord is gracious and compassionate.  
<sup>5</sup> He has given food to those who fear Him;  
He will remember His covenant forever.  
<sup>6</sup> He has made known to His people the power of His  
works,

In giving them the heritage of the nations.

- Psalms 111:2-6

Note that the author states how wonderful the works of God are and then he goes on to list several of them.

## 2. God's grace

Your lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens,  
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

- Psalms 36:5

How wonderful is God's grace.

<sup>6</sup>Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;

Your judgments are like a great deep.

O Lord, You preserve man and beast.

<sup>7</sup>How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!

And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of  
Your wings.

<sup>8</sup>They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house;

And You give them to drink of the river of Your  
delights.

<sup>9</sup>For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we  
see light.

- Psalms 36:6-9

The author lists the various blessings obtained by God's grace.

## D. Conclusion

Once the author has listed the reasons and examples of God's greatness or grace he then renews his original call for his readers to praise God.

- <sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
<sup>2</sup> Give thanks to the God of gods,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
<sup>3</sup> Give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
<sup>4</sup> To Him who alone does great wonders,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;  
- Psalms 136:1-4

A call to praise God for both His greatness and mercy.

- <sup>10</sup> To Him who smote the Egyptians in their firstborn,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting,  
<sup>11</sup> And brought Israel out from their midst,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting,  
<sup>12</sup> With a strong hand and an outstretched arm,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
<sup>13</sup> To Him who divided the Red Sea asunder,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting,  
<sup>14</sup> And made Israel pass through the midst of it,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;  
<sup>15</sup> But He overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red  
Sea,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
<sup>16</sup> To Him who led His people through the wilderness,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;  
<sup>17</sup> To Him who smote great kings,

For His lovingkindness is everlasting,  
- Psalms 136:10-17

Examples of His mercy

Give thanks to the God of heaven,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
- Psalms 136:26

Conclusion: A renewed call to praise God.

Sometimes the conclusion is a general exhortation, a petition or a teaching of some kind.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
A good understanding have all those who do His  
commandments;  
His praise endures forever.  
- Psalms 111:10

## **E. Epilogue**

The author sometimes book-ends his poem by placing at the end the same expression he used to begin the psalm.

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Give thanks to the God of heaven,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.  
- Psalms 136:1;26

# SUMMARY

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Praise Psalms celebrate God's greatness and mercy in the following ways:

1. They begin by offering words of praise or calling on others to recognize and praise God.
2. They enumerate and describe the things God has, is, and will do that are signs of His greatness and mercy.
3. They repeat the exhortation for others to begin or continue in their praise of God.
4. They finish with a teaching or final word of praise.

## PSALM 135 - EXAMPLE

Begins with words of praise (prologue)

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord!  
Praise the name of the Lord;  
Praise Him, O servants of the Lord,

Encouragement for others to praise.

<sup>2</sup> You who stand in the house of the Lord,  
In the courts of the house of our God!  
<sup>3</sup> Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good;  
Sing praises to His name, for it is lovely.  
<sup>4</sup> For the Lord has chosen Jacob for Himself,  
Israel for His own possession.

Examples of His greatness and mercy.

<sup>5</sup> For I know that the Lord is great  
And that our Lord is above all gods.  
<sup>6</sup> Whatever the Lord pleases, He does,  
In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.  
<sup>7</sup> He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the  
earth;  
Who makes lightnings for the rain,  
Who brings forth the wind from His treasuries.  
<sup>8</sup> He smote the firstborn of Egypt,  
Both of man and beast.  
<sup>9</sup> He sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt,  
Upon Pharaoh and all his servants.  
<sup>10</sup> He smote many nations  
And slew mighty kings,  
<sup>11</sup> Sihon, king of the Amorites,  
And Og, king of Bashan,  
And all the kingdoms of Canaan;  
<sup>12</sup> And He gave their land as a heritage,  
A heritage to Israel His people.  
<sup>13</sup> Your name, O Lord, is everlasting,  
Your remembrance, O Lord, throughout all  
generations.  
<sup>14</sup> For the Lord will judge His people  
And will have compassion on His servants.  
<sup>15</sup> The idols of the nations are but silver and gold,  
The work of man's hands.  
<sup>16</sup> They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
They have eyes, but they do not see;  
<sup>17</sup> They have ears, but they do not hear,  
Nor is there any breath at all in their mouths.  
<sup>18</sup> Those who make them will be like them,  
Yes, everyone who trusts in them.

Renewed call to praise God (epilogue)

<sup>19</sup> O house of Israel, bless the Lord;  
O house of Aaron, bless the Lord;  
<sup>20</sup> O house of Levi, bless the Lord;  
You who revere the Lord, bless the Lord.  
<sup>21</sup> Blessed be the Lord from Zion,  
Who dwells in Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!

# 11.

## Royal Psalms

As inspired poetry, the psalms express man's praise as well as his questions and laments before God as he lives out his frail human life always facing death but with a hope of existence beyond the grave. They are the writings of those, who through inspiration, could see beyond this world into the reality of the unseen spiritual dimension. The psalms address how human beings are affected not only by adversity and sin but also by the enormity of God's creation, the power of His word and the reality of His presence in their everyday lives.

The final category of psalms that we will examine are the Royal psalms which were mainly written to describe man's relationship with earthly rulers of that period. A number of these psalms also pointed the reader beyond the present situation to a future time when their spiritual aspirations for God's rule would be fulfilled (i.e. Prophetic psalms).

### **ROYAL PSALMS**

Royal (messianic) psalms deal with the king as God's anointed or chosen one. Many are prayers for the wisdom of the king, his long life or success in battle. Some are prophetic in nature in that

they also point to the ideal future king, the Messiah or the King of kings.

In the Old Testament the people understood the term "Messiah" in two different ways:

1. He was the anointed one (the English word "Christ" is from a Greek word meaning anointed and is equivalent to the word Messiah). This was a term used for a prophet, priest or king who was separated from among the people and given an office or task to fulfill.
2. In a more specific sense, it referred to the ultimate ideal king, savior and Lord who was to come and save His people forever.

The poets were often speaking about actual kings when they referred to Messiahs or anointed ones. The New Testament writers, in turn, took these words and applied them to Jesus as the "Christ," the "Anointed One" or the "Messiah."

## PSALM 2

In this psalm the writer demonstrates how the king, as God's chosen one, can have confidence despite the plotting and scheming of ungodly enemies.

<sup>1</sup> Why are the nations in an uproar  
And the peoples devising a vain thing?  
<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand  
And the rulers take counsel together  
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,  
<sup>3</sup> "Let us tear their fetters apart  
And cast away their cords from us!"

The nations are the Gentiles and their rulers. The author demonstrates that to conspire against the king is to conspire against the One who has made him king, God Himself. In the same way, to attack the messenger (preacher) is to attack the one who sends the messenger and the message, Christ Himself.

<sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs,  
The Lord scoffs at them.

<sup>5</sup> Then He will speak to them in His anger  
And terrify them in His fury, saying,

<sup>6</sup> “But as for Me, I have installed My King  
Upon Zion, My holy mountain.”

<sup>7</sup> “I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:  
He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten  
You.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your  
inheritance,  
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.

<sup>9</sup> ‘You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
You shall shatter them like earthenware.’”

Conspiring against God's ordained has two responses:

1. God scorns the plans of men who are against Him as foolish and futile.
2. He will ultimately judge such things by punishing the guilty and upholding the one that He has chosen in the following ways:
  - a) God will confirm his position as son (anointed earthly kings were seen as sons of God). However, there is also a messianic reference to Jesus here as the Son of God and ruler of all.

- b) God will provide blessings for the king and give him victory over his enemies.

<sup>10</sup> Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;  
Take warning, O judges of the earth.

<sup>11</sup> Worship the Lord with reverence  
And rejoice with trembling.

<sup>12</sup> Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry,  
and you perish in the way,  
For His wrath may soon be kindled.  
How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

The rebels are warned to repent and submit to God's anointed king. In the historical context, this is a warning by David to others not to trifle with Israel and her king who, although small, is protected by the true God. In the messianic sense this is also true, that rebellion against God and His King, Jesus, will fail and be punished, however, submission to Him will bring reward and protection.

## **PSALM 45 - A SONG FOR A ROYAL WEDDING**

Some psalms were written to commemorate battles and great national events. The marriage of the king was one such occasion and Psalms 45 was written especially for this joyful time. It also provides a similar image of the marriage between God and His nation which, in a messianic sense, is between Christ and His church. This psalm, therefore, can be interpreted using three different contexts: historic (the earthly king and his bride), metaphoric (God and the nation of Israel), and messianic (Christ and His church).

<sup>1</sup> My heart overflows with a good theme;  
I address my verses to the King;  
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.  
<sup>2</sup> You are fairer than the sons of men;  
Grace is poured upon Your lips;  
Therefore God has blessed You forever.  
<sup>3</sup> Gird Your sword on Your thigh, O Mighty One,  
In Your splendor and Your majesty!  
<sup>4</sup> And in Your majesty ride on victoriously,  
For the cause of truth and meekness and  
righteousness;  
Let Your right hand teach You awesome things.  
<sup>5</sup> Your arrows are sharp;  
The peoples fall under You;  
Your arrows are in the heart of the King's enemies.  
<sup>6</sup> Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;  
A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your  
kingdom.  
<sup>7</sup> You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You  
With the oil of joy above Your fellows.  
<sup>8</sup> All Your garments are fragrant with myrrh and aloes  
and cassia;  
Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have made  
You glad.  
<sup>9</sup> Kings' daughters are among Your noble ladies;  
At Your right hand stands the queen in gold from  
Ophir.

The author describes the king: wise and blessed by God (vs. 2); defender of the righteous (vs. 3-5); blessed, honored and joyful (vs. 8-9); a son of God and as God Himself (Hebrews 1:8-9). When originally written, this psalm only referred to a man (the

king himself), but in the messianic sense can only be properly ascribed to Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> Listen, O daughter, give attention and incline your ear:

Forget your people and your father's house;

<sup>11</sup> Then the King will desire your beauty.

Because He is your Lord, bow down to Him.

<sup>12</sup> The daughter of Tyre will come with a gift;

The rich among the people will seek your favor.

<sup>13</sup> The King's daughter is all glorious within;

Her clothing is interwoven with gold.

<sup>14</sup> She will be led to the King in embroidered work;

The virgins, her companions who follow her,

Will be brought to You.

<sup>15</sup> They will be led forth with gladness and rejoicing;

They will enter into the King's palace.

The author now describes the queen. She is a foreign princess and the poet entreats her to forget her past as well as her former home and give herself totally to her husband the king (vs. 10-12). He describes her maidens, the beauty of her wedding garments and the joy she experiences at being the king's new bride (vs. 13-15). These are also images or types for the church and Christ as well as for God and His people.

<sup>16</sup> In place of your fathers will be your sons;

You shall make them princes in all the earth.

<sup>17</sup> I will cause Your name to be remembered in all generations;

Therefore the peoples will give You thanks forever and ever.

The poet looks into the future and sees the line of the king being propagated with future kings through this union. This blessing is appropriate for the present context of the marriage of the king, but is also a prophetic look at the union between Christ the King and His bride which is the church (II Corinthians 11:2-3; Revelations 19:21). The analogy can only fit this future union:

1. Jesus is also wise and blessed (Luke 2:52).
2. He is the defender of righteousness and exalted through resurrection to the right hand of God (Acts 2:33).
3. His union with the church produces a future royal heritage that will also reign with Him in heaven (II Timothy 2:12).

This psalm, about an earthly king's wedding, fits the historical context at the time of its composition but also speaks to the higher, nobler, and more sublime imagery of God and His chosen nation; and then the fulfillment of both these images by the union of Christ and His church at the end of the world (Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 21:9).

## **PSALM 110 - THE PRIEST/KING**

This is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. It is important to note that while many statements could refer to David, many can only refer to Christ, the ideal King and Messiah. When written, it was seen as an ideal to which the king could rise. The psalm is divided into two sections both beginning with a divine utterance.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord says to my Lord:  
"Sit at My right hand

Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”

<sup>2</sup> The Lord will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,

“Rule in the midst of Your enemies.”

<sup>3</sup> Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;

In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,  
Your youth are to You as the dew.

The writer states that king's rule is such by divine authority. His throne will be in Zion and he will rule his enemies. When the king rules, people (especially young and strong men) will fill his army. The author makes a comparison saying, in the same way that the dawn brings with it the dew that covers all, when the king reigns his soldiers will cover the land.

In Matthew 22:44, Jesus gives the prophetic and messianic meaning to this passage by explaining that David was not only referring to himself here, but also to the future divine Messiah who was to come, and whose rulership and army were to be similar.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind,  
“You are a priest forever  
According to the order of Melchizedek.”

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is at Your right hand;  
He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.

<sup>6</sup> He will judge among the nations,  
He will fill them with corpses,  
He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.

<sup>7</sup> He will drink from the brook by the wayside;  
Therefore He will lift up His head.

This same king is also anointed as a priest (vs. 4). However, He would not be a priestly type like Aaron (from the tribe of Levi), who was temporal, limited by human weakness, and offered repeated sacrifices only for the Jewish nation. This priest would be like Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20) who, as a type, represented a universal and eternal priesthood (Melchizedek was not of any particular lineage and his brief appearance without beginning or end signified an eternal nature).

This section can only have an application in the future because at the time of writing, kings could not serve as priests, and only a divine being could claim universal rulership and eternal life. Being anointed priest and king by God is the guarantee of a ruler's sovereignty over the nations. The phrase "He will lift up His head" is imagery expressing the idea of victory over enemies.

Historically, the king in concert with an enlightened priesthood, saw the nation of Israel as the universal light of the world (Isaiah 49:6) and this psalm would call him to a more noble and godly ideal. Prophetically, however, Psalms 110 refers to the perfect balance of Jesus' dual roles as king and priest offering Himself on behalf of the people over which He ruled.

## **SUMMARY**

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The Psalms have been given by God to help us express godly ideas using godly phrasing. They assist us in verbalizing the "groaning" (Romans 8:26) of our spirit when our own human words and ideas seem so inadequate to lay before the One we desperately want to praise and adore.

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