

Lesson 8

The Messianic Psalms (1)

When we speak of “Messianic” psalms we refer to psalms that, in one fashion or another, pertain to the Messiah or Christ (Hebrew and Greek equivalents of “anointed”).

A study of these psalms is important for Christian students because they demonstrate in a very detailed way that the plan of God for our salvation was not merely a general

idea slowly brought to fruition, but rather a plan worked out in every detail centuries before Jesus came into the world. It is amazing the details about Jesus’ death and the people and events surrounding it that are spelled out ahead of time in the Psalms.

While the book of Psalms is not generally to be considered a book of prophecy, it certainly is full of proph-

ecy. Even where they do not speak directly about the coming Messiah, a most common theme of the psalms is *redemption*, and of course, redemption was the ultimate purpose of the Messiah coming to earth.

The Messianic psalms speak of Jesus from His birth to His betrayal, from His torture to His death, from His resurrection to His ascension to heaven, and from His world-wide reign to His coming again. They speak of the Messiah as king, priest and prophet.

There are a large number of specific details about the life and work of Jesus (the Messiah or Christ) which are foretold in the Psalms and then alluded to as fulfillments in the New Testament. Here are some of them:

Jesus Himself said “that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets *and the Psalms* concerning Me.” He went on to open their eyes to those Scriptures and summarize their teaching that “it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:44-47).

Earlier in His ministry He had pointed to various psalms to demonstrate that what was going on about Him was fulfilling divine prediction. For instance, during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem when children cried out “Hosanna to the Son of David” (see Psalm 118:26) and the scribes and high priests were offended, Jesus pointed them to Psalm 8:2, saying “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise” (Matt. 21:15-16). The next day as Jesus taught about His rejection by the leaders of Israel, He quoted from Psalm 118:22-23 that they

Psalm	Prophecy	Fulfilled in the NT
2:7	Called God’s Son	Matt. 3:17
8:2	Praised by children	Matt. 21:15-16
8:6	Ruler of all	Heb. 2:8
16:10	Rises from dead	Matt. 28:7
22:1	Forsaken by God	Matt. 27:46
22:7-8	Derided by His enemies	Luke 23:35
22:16	His hands and feet pierced	John 20:27
22:18	Casting of lots for His clothing	Matt. 27:35-36
34:20	None of His bones broken	John 19:32, 33, 36
35:11	False witnesses accuse Him	Mark 14:57
35:19	Hated without a cause	John 15:25
40:7-8	He delighted to do God’s will	Heb. 10:7
41:9	Betrayed by a friend	Luke 22:47
45:6	To be an eternal king	Heb. 1:8
68:18	Ascended into heaven	Acts 1:9-11
69:9	Was zealous for God’s house	John 2:17
69:21	Given vinegar and gall	Matt. 27:34
109:8	His betrayer is replaced	Acts 1:20
110:1	He rules over His enemies	Matt. 22:44
110:4	To be a priest forever	Heb. 5:6
118:22	Chief cornerstone of God’s building	Matt. 21:42
118:26	Comes in the name of the Lord	Matt. 21:9

were rejecting the foundation stone of the promised new kingdom of God (Matt. 21:42-45).

Speaking to a group about the Messiah, Jesus asked them whose son He was. The answer He received was “the son of David.” Jesus then used Psalm 110 to show that the Messiah also had to be David’s Lord (Matt. 22:43-45).

On the cross, Jesus alluded to Psalms 22:15 and 69:3 in His cry of “I thirst.” And, He likely was drawing attention to all of Psalm 22 as He cried out “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,” which was the psalm’s opening verse (Matt. 27:46).

Prophecies Served as a Tool for Identifying the Messiah

As Jesus lived upon the earth, teaching and performing a broad range of miracles, He did so not simply because He had compassion on the suffering (which He did), but to fulfill prophecies that would identify Him as the long-awaited Messiah.

When John the Baptist asked, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them’” (Matt. 11:2-5). His point was that John could compare what the Old Testament had predicted the Messiah would do with what Jesus was doing, and reach the right conclusion about Jesus being the Christ.

Likewise, we can point present-day unbelievers to the Psalms that teach about the Messiah, then compare Jesus’ life and work to those psalms. Honest hearts will see that only Jesus fulfilled what was written there.

The Old Testament, including Psalms, contains about 330 prophecies about Jesus. He fulfilled every one. Consider that the statistical probability of one man fulfilling even eight of these has been calculated as one in 100,000,000,000,000,000. The probability of fulfilling just 48 of those prophecies is one in 10 to the 157th power. The proof of Jesus being the Christ is absolutely overwhelming, and the Psalms are a major part of the evidence.

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Jesus’ Disciples also Used the Psalms in their Teaching about Him

Just after Jesus had ascended back to heaven, Peter used Psalms 69 and 109 to demonstrate to the other disciples in the upper room that Judas had to be replaced (Acts 1:15-26). This resulted in the appointment of Matthias.

In a prayer in Acts 4:24-28, a disciple quotes Psalm 2:1-2 as prophetic evidence that Jesus would be crucified by Herod, Pontius Pilate, and by both Jews and Gentiles.

The first gospel sermon after the resurrection of Jesus, on the Day of Pentecost, contains several psalm quotations (Acts 2:25-28, 34). Peter particularly uses Psalm 16 to illustrate that the resurrection of Jesus was anticipated and foretold.

Space does not permit a comprehensive listing of all the usages the early disciples made of the Psalms

in preaching the gospel. However, it would be remiss not to draw attention to Hebrews 1, where the writer uses various psalms almost exclusively to prove the superiority of Jesus over angels (other divine spokesmen). He references Psalms 2:7, 89:27, 97:7, 104:4, 45:6-7, 102:25-27, 110:1, and 103:20, in that order.

Messianic Psalms Take Different Forms

Students should be aware that there are different forms of Messianic psalms. Because of the diversity, it also should be observed that there is not complete consensus about which psalms are messianic.

1. Typical Messianic. In these, the subject of the psalm is in some respects a “type” of the Christ to come. David is often such a subject. He was the king of Israel, God’s shepherd over the nation, and a “man after God’s own heart.” Psalm 69:4, 9 serves as an example of this, where the original reference is to David, but he serves as typical of what Jesus would experience and be to a greater degree.

2. Typical Prophetic. Psalm 22 is an excellent example of this form. The psalmist uses language describing his then present experience, which actually points beyond his own life and becomes historically and fully true only in the experience and life of Christ.

3. Indirectly Messianic. In these psalms the composition refers to a king or the house of David in general, but awaits its ultimate or higher fulfillment in the Messiah. See Psalms 2, 45, and 72.

4. Purely Prophetic. Unlike the first three forms, these psalms refer solely to Jesus as the Christ, without any reference to any other son of David. See Psalm 110 for an example.

5. Enthronement Psalms. These psalms anticipate the coming of

Jehovah and the consummation of His kingdom, which would be fulfilled in Jesus. Examples include Psalms 96-99.

Three Keys to Unlocking Meaning of Messianic Psalms

Three keys can be used to unlock the meaning of psalms that relate to Jesus as the Christ or Messiah.

1. A New Testament Quotation from Such a Psalm. The best way to interpret a passage of Scripture is by using the Scriptures. When a New Testament writer tells you what a psalm referred to, you have a divine commentary. Many of our modern Bibles have helps that identify where quotations are from. As Matthew describes Jesus' teaching in parables, he indicates that style of

teaching was a fulfillment of something spoken by a prophet. He then quotes Psalm 78:2. Other places, the gospel writers will simply say "It is written" and then quote, as Jesus did in John 2:17, citing Psalm 69:9.

2. About Whom is This Psalm Speaking? Like the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading from Psalm 53, you must determine who is being spoken about, the psalmist himself or some other person (Acts 8:34). Some psalms clearly have two people speaking, but it is not immediately apparent who is speaking. Other times, pronouns are used, leaving some mystery. Often, to answer the "who is being spoken about" question, we must rely on our first key, the New Testament illumination.

3. Determine the Time about Which the Psalm Is Referring.

Often a psalm will first appear to be referring to an event in the time the psalmist was writing, and in part that may be true, but a closer look often will reveal only a partial application to persons or nations before Christ. The fullest and major application is to something to occur in the life and work of Jesus. Read Psalm 30 to illustrate. It is said in the superscription to be a song at the dedication of the house of David. It speaks of escaping various foes, of being triumphant. David certainly experienced such in escaping from King Saul and his own son, Absalom, but consider that it also speaks very much of Jesus' victory over the grave.

Homework and Questions

1. What would be your definition of a "Messianic psalm"? _____
2. Read the following quotations from the Psalms, as well as the New Testament passages, and write in the blank space a summary of the event referenced.

Psalm	Reference	Event
8:3-8	Heb. 2:5-10; 1 Cor. 15:27	
89:3-4, 26, 28-29, 34-37	Acts 2:30	
109:6-19	Acts 1:16-20	
132:12b	Acts 2:30	
102:25-27	Heb. 1:10-120	
2:1-12	Acts 4:25-28; 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5	
31:5	Luke 23:36	

3. The book of Psalms is not considered to be among the Old Testament books of prophecy. However, it has a great deal of prophecy in it. How do you explain this? _____
4. Explain the three important keys to understanding each Messianic psalm. _____
5. In what circumstances today could you find it useful to use the Psalms in teaching? _____

In our next lesson, we will look specifically at some of the psalms that are most clearly Messianic in nature.