



Psalms

Randy Blackaby



The Book of Psalms

By Randy Blackaby



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The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a grand compendium of divinely inspired Hebrew poetry, eclectic in its scope of topics, varied in its human authorship and diverse in its original purposes. These psalms served purposes in ancient Jewish worship and are foundational in terms of the music used in New Testament worship.

By biblical standards, the book is large. Many of the ideas expressed are duplicated in various psalms. For this reason, undertaking a chapter by chapter, verse by verse study, from beginning to end, seems overwhelming and potentially tedious for most students.

Therefore, this study will attempt a different approach, hoping in its methods to whet the appetite of students for even deeper study of this important portion of Scripture.

This workbook's goals are to:

- Introduce the place and uses of psalmody in the Bible, and in the history and worship of God's people.
- Explain in a relatively simple way the basic nature of Hebrew poetry, as distinguished from English poetry.
- Explore in a general way the structure, historical settings, human authors and likely manner of forming the collection now found in this book.

- Study the various types of psalms, spending time with specific examples of each type in the psalm library.
- Encourage students to use the psalms for daily devotional meditation and for learning to express righteous emotions, share deep concerns and better learn the highest manner of worship.

To make this study practical and demonstrative of the values available for the church today, we'll be suggesting that classes studying this material:

- Sing aloud some of the psalms. Some songbooks facilitate this by providing psalms set to familiar tunes used in other more contemporary songs.
- Create their own psalms, trying to adapt Hebrew poetry characteristics to English.
- Learn the central role of the Psalms in Messianic prophecy pointing to Christ and the Lord's fulfillment and use of the Psalms in His own life and work.

From the outset of this endeavor, the author has recognized the impossibility of exhaustively presenting all that some students might desire to learn about the Psalms. On the other hand, there

may be more than some are ready to digest in the explanations of various aspects of Hebrew poetry. It is hoped students will make the most they can of what is presented. And, for those wanting more, the bibliography at the end of this workbook may be of value.

I cannot end this preface without noting that poetry has greater appeal to some people than to others. Some of us gravitate toward the rational, factual and highly logical presentation of precepts, perhaps best illustrated in the treatises of the apostle Paul. Others are more drawn to an expression of divine truth that permits and instills strong emotional feeling that moves first the heart and then the life to action.

Scripture contains both of these manners of presentation, suggesting strongly that all of us need both. It is my prayer that students learn as much as I have in the preparation of this study.

—Randy Blackaby

The Book of Psalms contains 150 songs of praise, prayer, and descriptions of every kind of human experience. These psalms may be the best known portion of the Old Testament among Christians. The book is the longest in the Bible. The psalms often are added to Bibles that otherwise contain only the New Testament, emphasizing their perceived value for Christians.

The great importance of the psalms to Christians further can be seen in the sizable use of them in the New Testament itself. These psalms are the most quoted part of the Old Testament within the New Testament. One commentary has stated that of 219 Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, 116 are from the Psalms.

Jesus made mention of the psalms speaking of Him. He said, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44).

The psalms were written over a period of about 1,000 years, with Moses (ca. 1300-1400 BC) being perhaps the earliest of psalm authors. Others may have been written



as late as the time of Israel’s captivity in Babylon or the days when a remnant returned to Jerusalem (see Pss. 85, 126, 137). Therefore, the book should be understood to be a compilation of writings, not the

work of a single human author at a specific point in time. Thus, the Psalms contain some of the earliest and some of the latest literature in the Old Testament. The psalms may be the oldest collection of ancient poems in the world, certainly older than their

heathen Greek and Roman counterparts.

The Hebrew psalms differ primarily and dramatically from the Greek, for example, in subject matter. While the psalms seek to advance the moral condition of men, Greek poets, as Adam Clarke has noted, had subjects that “were either a fabulous theology, a false and ridiculous religion, chimerical wars, absurd heroism, impure love, agriculture, national sports, or hymns in honor of gods more corrupt than the most profligate of men.”

The Hebrew title for this portion of Scripture is *sepher tehillim*, meaning “book of praises.” The Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint) bears the title *Psalmoi*, from which we get the English “Psalms.”

Older Poetic Psalms or Songs

The book of Psalms does not reflect the oldest of poetic writings. The “Song of Moses,” an ode of triumph after the Red Sea crossing from Egypt, is recorded in Exodus 15:1-15.

Read Deuteronomy 32:1-43 and 33:1-29 in a version showing the poetic nature of these passages. These songs encourage Israel to keep the law after entering Canaan.

See also the “Song of Deborah” in Judges 5 and Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2.

Why Study the Psalms Today?

Twice the apostle Paul pointed to the value of Old Testament Scriptures for Christians. In Romans 14:4 he wrote, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” And, in 1 Corinthians 10:11, he said, “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

In writing to Timothy, the same apostle referenced the importance of the old covenant Scriptures to the young evangelist, saying, “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly

equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Peter used the Psalms of David in preaching the first gospel sermon after the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:25-28, 34-35). We’ll further examine this use of the psalms when we look more closely at those which are messianic in nature.

In addition to these general uses, we are instructed to use either the old psalms or similar lyrics in New Testament-era endeavors. Paul wrote, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19) and “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). And James wrote, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (5:13).

The King James Version Is Not Best for Poetry Reading

The King James Version doesn’t set the poetry sections in lined form, whereas the New King James, New American Standard and many other newer translations, do set the text in poetic line. So, students are encouraged to at least compare other translations with the KJV.

pray. It teaches us how. The same is illustrated in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where He showed His disciples how to pray. The psalms serve as a help in expressing our praise and worship to God. And besides, they explain the way of righteous living and tell us what to do when we fail. Songs and poetry long have been recognized as a superior medium for expressing human emotions. Every Christian finds times when he or she is excited and joyful; other times when he is sad, discouraged, or otherwise troubled. For all these emotions and more there is recorded a psalm to which we can relate.

The Poetic Nature of Psalms Needs to Be Appreciated

As we undertake a study of the Psalms we must realize that we are dealing with a different type of biblical literature. Unlike most of the Pentateuch and writings of the prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations are Hebrew poetry.

While students may find it difficult to find a good explanation of the difference between prose and poetry, it is observable that somewhat different goals are achieved by each.

Poetry is designed, not to convey facts alone, but to formulate a concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in language

Purposes of the Psalms

- Teach moral principles
- Praise of God, devotion
- Historical remembrance of God’s dealing with man
- Confession, sorrow for sin
- Prophetic; pointing to the Messiah
- Offering thanks to God, prayer
- Expressing sorrow, pain of human affliction
- Meditation
- Invoking God’s wrath on rebellious sinners; asking His protection

Note: We’ll be looking at these in more detail in future lessons.

A Hymn and Prayer Book

The Book of Psalms served as both the hymn book and the prayer book of ancient Israel. They used these songs or poems as a part of their worship. The psalms serve a host of functions. They help us learn how to pray. The Bible does not assume that we are able, instinctively, to

chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. It often uses compression of thought, a heightened vocabulary, and a different or free syntax. Its emotional content often is expressed through a variety of techniques, from direct description to symbolism, including extensive use of metaphors and similes.

John Goldingay has written that, “The Psalms make it possible to say things that are otherwise ‘unsayable.’”

Poetry can be somewhat exaggerated in expression in an effort to express human emotions, but a reader of the Psalms will miss a great deal if he or she only sees in them human expression. They also are a Divine expression, inspired, codified messages to mankind, as well.

We shall see in our study of the Psalms that they, indeed, express emotional responses to such diverse things as the majesty, sovereignty, and wisdom of God, the joy of salvation, and the despair of human failure and sin. As such, this poetry gives human emotion and feelings divine guidance and regulation.

While God’s word must be intellectually understood and rationally applied, it also is important not to so intellectualize our faith that we minimize our relationship with God. Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, declared that the greatest of all the commandments is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all our strength” (Matt. 22:37-40). The Psalms help us to appreciate and make verbal expression of our relationship with God. As a husband’s words of honor and adoration are important to his re-

lationship with his wife, so are our expressions to and about God.

A musician, Don Wyrzten, has suggested that the biblical psalms must be perceived on two levels:

1. **Form:** How something is said, its style
2. **Content:** What is said, its substance

More will be said about the specific nature of Hebrew poetry, which is different than our English poetry, in **Lesson 3**.

Singing the Psalms

Sing the following in class after reading appropriate psalms at home

“The Lord My Shepherd Is”
based on 23rd Psalm

“Psalm 19”

Designed for Use with Stringed Instruments

The biblical psalms originally were written for Israel, the Jews, and in accordance with the Law of Moses, they were designed to be used with the accompaniment of stringed instruments. The Greek root word for “psalm” is *psalmos*, which is derived from the Hebrew word *zamar*, meaning “to pluck” or take hold of the strings of an instrument with the fingers.

Franz Delitzsch, in his commentary on the Psalms, noted, “Psalms are songs for the lyre, and therefore lyric poems in the strictest sense.” David, as well as other writers, wrote for accompaniment by a harp.

In the New Testament we are commanded to sing and make the melody in the “heart” (Eph. 5:19). The phrase “make melody” in that

passage comes from the Greek word *psallontes* and means, literally, to “pluck the strings of the heart.”

The New Testament speaks numerous times of Christians “singing,” but never commands or gives an example of Christians playing instruments in worship. And, secular history shows the early church did not use such.

Authorship

A common misconception is that David wrote all the psalms. He is generally believed to be identified as the writer of seventy-three psalms and is described in 2 Samuel 23:1 as “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” Another forty-eight psalms are anonymous as to author, although David is potentially the unnamed author of some of these.

Some scholars have suggested that some of the psalms, assumed by the titles to have been written by David, may, in fact, have been written “for” David or “about” David, or even in reference to the Davidic line of kings that culminates in Jesus.

Whatever the case with the psalms with David’s name in the titles, that leaves twenty-nine psalms which are attributed as follows:

- **Asaph**, a Levite and music director during the reigns of David and Solomon; twelve psalms (see 1 Chron. 16:4-5, 37; 15:19; 25:1-2; 2 Chron. 29:30)
- **Sons of Korah**, Levites who worked in the temple; twelve psalms
- **Solomon**, Psalms 72 and 127 within the book of Psalms, but known to have written many more. His writing of 1,005 songs is mentioned in 1 Kings 4:29-32.
- **Moses**, Psalm 90



The photo shows an ancient harpist playing his instrument. Perhaps David played an instrument similar to this one.

authenticated by at least two measures. Ancient Hebrew manuscripts attest to the antiquity of this portion of Scripture. More importantly, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament accepted them as authoritative and divinely prophetic.

Themes in the Psalms

There are many, many themes in the Psalms, but perhaps three are more predominant throughout. They are:

1. The portrayal of God. He is seen in the psalms as a Shepherd, Creator, King, Warrior, Judge, and “the hope” of mankind. He is presented as being great, eternal, powerful, patient, just, forgiving, loving, and good. Thus, the psalms give us a superb source of description of the otherwise “invisible God.”

2. A picture of man. Primarily on display are the emotions of mankind, ranging from love, joy and thankfulness to the lesser feelings of fear, shame, guilt, and impatience.

3. The need to practice righteousness. The psalms expressly and repeatedly present how men ought to conduct themselves before both men and God in righteousness.

When these three themes are then considered together, we observe the need of man to worship, glorify, and imitate God so that he can learn God’s ways and develop a spiritual condition that will allow access to the Divine Being and to avoid the judgment of God.

Irving L. Jensen, in his *Survey of the Old Testament*, notes the phenomenal repetition of certain key words that emphasize these combined themes. The words “righteous” and “righteousness” are repeated more than 130 times. “Sin” and “iniquity” are referenced at least 65 times, while “good” and “evil” are mentioned about 40 times each. Judgment and its cognates are used more than 100 times.

Practical Value of the Psalms

In the Bible’s library, the Book of Psalms provides two outstanding practical benefits for all who believe in God and seek to do His will.

1. It presents to us models of faith and devotion to God. David, in particular, serves this function. His life had many careers, from shepherd boy to servant of the king to warrior, fugitive, exile, and elderly man. He was sometimes poor and sometimes rich. He was at times hated and at other times loved. He was at times exemplary in faith and at other times a shameful example. We see him when joyful or penitent. Somewhere in David’s experiences we should be able to find ourselves.

2. This book also presents truth in terms of human experience, rather than abstractly. It is not merely the expression of what one ought to do, but expressions of results when human beings actually do as God directs. For instance, David expresses his understanding of the need for holiness after his great sin with Bathsheba. He literally felt the need to be cleansed and made holy. It wasn’t merely an abstract idea to him any longer.

- **Hemen**, a contemporary of David and Asaph, who is called “the singer”; Psalm 98 (see 1 Chron. 15:19; 25:5; 1 Kings 4:31)
- **Ethan**, a companion with Asaph and Hemen in the temple worship, Psalm 89 (see 1 Chron. 15:19; 1 Kings 4:31)

While the Book of Psalms does not attribute any authorship to Psalms 2 and 95, they are attributed in the New Testament to David (Acts 4:25-26; Heb. 4:6-7).

Authenticity and place in the canon

The place of the Psalms in the canon of the Old Testament is clearly

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Scan through the Psalms and find three (3) examples of prayers within them. _____

Also list anything particular about prayer that you learn. _____

2. See what definitions and differences you can find for the following terms:

Psalms: _____

Hymns: _____

Spiritual songs: _____

3. Thinking of one of your happiest days as a Christian, write a four-line song or psalm to express your feelings to God about it. (**Note:** It doesn't need to rhyme.) _____

4. Explain why New Testament Christians should not use instrumental music in worship in spite of the fact that David and other Israelites used instruments during the Old Testament period. _____

5. Find psalms that express the following emotions:

Joy _____

Anger _____

Praise _____

Repentance _____

Trust _____

6. What difference in impact or effect do you see in the verbal speaking or singing of a divinely inspired message and the simple reading of the same material? _____

7. Research in your Bible some of the background development of singing and psalmody in the days of David.

- His early involvement prior to becoming king (1 Sam. 16:14-23; 18:10; 19:8-9)
- When he fled before King Saul (Pss. 18, 54, 57, 59, 63)
- Immediately after he replaced Saul as king (2 Sam. 1:17-27)
- His appointment of 4,000 Levite singers in 24 classes (1 Chron. 25; and 15:17-24, as well as 23:4-5)
- Other (2 Sam. 22 and 23:1-7)

Lesson 2

Structure and Form of the Book of Psalms

If viewed as a single book, the Psalms are the largest composition in the Old Testament. The book contains 150 psalms. Viewed in this way, the poetical songs can seem an overwhelming volume to study. The book is difficult to logically outline, most chapters having a different subject from the one preceding and following.

But, like the Pentateuch or five books of the Law of Moses, the Psalms actually are five books of poetry, rather than a single volume. Many scholars and students have sought to find an explicit explanation for the division, but have met with only limited success.

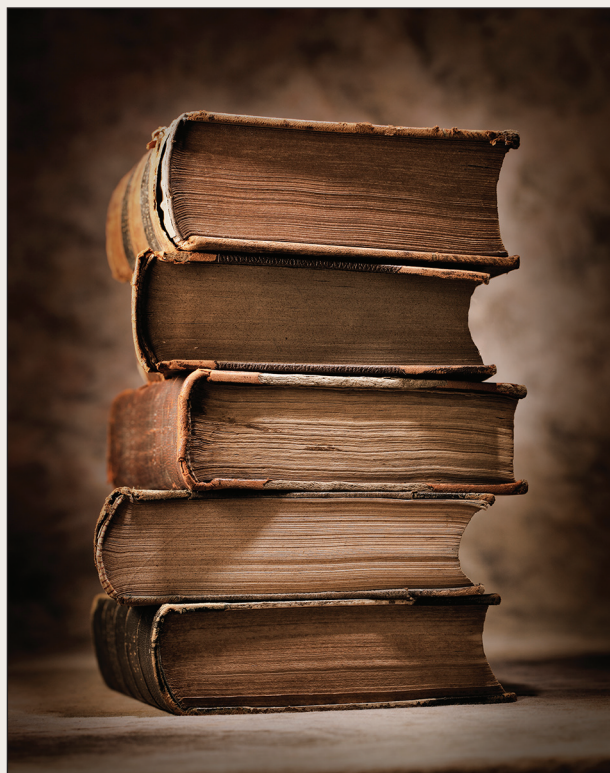
The division is most obvious by the way each section or book ends. Each ends with a doxology (*hymn or words of praise for God*), which doesn't appear to be an integral part of the last psalm in each section but rather a marking of division.

The five books are as follows:

- **Book One:** *Psalms 1-41*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel From everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.” All of the psalms in this section are ascribed to David, except 1, 2, 10, and 33, with the

possibility existing that David also wrote those.

- **Book Two:** *Psalms 42-72*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen. The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.” Inscriptions (*see more on these below*) indicate several authors wrote the psalms in this book or section.



- **Book Three:** *Psalms 73-89*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD forevermore! Amen and Amen.” This volume contains no psalms written by David except for Psalm 86. (See notation at end of Psalm 72.)
- **Book Four:** *Psalms 90-106*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel From everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, ‘Amen!’ Praise the LORD!” All of the psalms in this volume are by anonymous writers, except for 90, which is ascribed to Moses, and 101 and 103, which are said to be the work of David.
- **Book Five:** *Psalms 107-150*. All six verses of Psalm 150 are a praise of God and thus serve as an appropriate doxology to the entire five books. The psalms in this final section are varied in their character; appear to be designed for public worship and to be a collection of psalms not finding a logical place in the other volumes. Some of these are ascribed to David, the remainder anonymous.

Some Bible students think they see in the five books a direct parallel to the five books of law, with the arguments in favor of this view easier to see in some books than in others, and there appear to be exceptions to the logic of this approach. Its advocates see the following parallel:

Genesis section: *Book One*, dealing with issues related to *man*

- “Blessed is the *man* Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful” (1:1).

- “What is *man* that You are mindful of him, and the son of *man* that You visit him?” (8:4).
- “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the *man* who trusts in Him! (34:8).

Exodus section: *Book Two*, involving the themes of *national ruin* and *redemption* or *deliverance*

- “Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, *deliver* me from the deceitful and unjust man!” (43:1).
- “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will *deliver* you, and you shall glorify Me” (50:15).
- “*Deliver* me from my enemies, O my God; *Defend* me from those who rise up against me” (59:1).

Leviticus section: *Book Three*, focused on God’s house or *sanctuary* and worship

- “Until I went into the *sanctuary* of God; Then I understood their end” (73:17).
- “Your way, O God, is in the *sanctuary*; Who is so great a God as our God?” (77:13).
- “And He built His *sanctuary* like the heights, like the earth which He has established forever” (78:69).

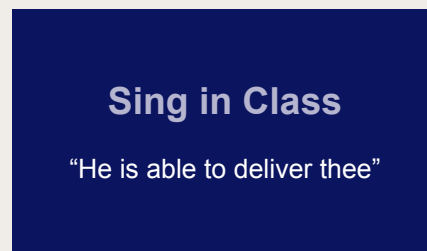
Numbers section: *Book Four*, exploring issues of peril, protection, and *wandering*

- “For forty years I was grieved with that generation, and said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My ways’” (95:10).
- “The people asked, and He brought quail, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven” (105:40).
- “Therefore He raised up His hand in an oath against them, to

overthrow them in the wilderness” (106:26).

Deuteronomy section: *Book Five*, revealing and praising the word or law of God

- “The works of His hands are verity and justice; all His *precepts* are sure. They stand fast forever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness” (111:7-8).
- “Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in *His commandments*” (112:1).
- “All Your *commandments* are faithful; They persecute me wrongfully; Help me!” (119:86)



Time Perspective in the Psalms

The Book of Psalms shares with other portions of God’s word the extraordinary ability to draw instruction and learning from a multi-directional time scale. At times the psalms look back (history’s lessons). At other times they reflect on man’s present (lessons from experience). Yet other psalms look to the future (prophecy) to help readers or singers make good judgments now in light of judgment and events yet to transpire.

This discovery, in itself, is profoundly instructional, in that it describes the three-fold nature of all learning.

Inscriptions, Superscriptions, titles, or Directions?

All but thirty-four of the 150 psalms have words written at their

beginning that are variously called inscriptions, superscriptions, titles, or directions for use. Those without an inscription are described in Jewish commentary (Talmud) as “orphan” psalms.

These inscriptions should not be confused with topical guides of modern origin, inserted into some of the newer translations of the Bible. The inscriptions are quite ancient, being found in all Hebrew manuscripts, and they are found in Septuagint manuscripts (Greek translation) as far back as two centuries before Christ.

It is an open question as to who authored these titles or superscriptions. Whether it was the individual authors, one or more people collecting the psalms into a body of writing for use in worship, or some others persons is unknown.

The purpose of these headings or directions is varied, sometimes clear as to purpose, sometimes not so clear. Some of them ascribe to the psalm the name of its supposed author. In some cases the ascription may speak of a person to whom it was addressed. (For example, some say a “psalm of Solomon” or “for Solomon.) Other special instructions may be directions to the song leader as to type of instruments to be used, the tune, or the occasion for which it was designed. Yet others may describe the historical circumstances under which or for which the psalm was written.

The meaning of some of the terms used in these inscriptions has been lost over time. Even the Septuagint (Greek translation) of the second century BC at times just copies the Hebrew word without attempting a translation, suggestive that the translators didn’t know what it meant.

Selah

Interspersed in a number of the psalms is the word “selah.” While the exact meaning appears to have been lost, it generally is believed to be some sort of musical punctuation or direction. It has been variously suggested that it is equivalent to *forte* or calls for a pause or the beginning of some instrumental accompaniment.

An alternate view is that it was inserted as a sign for an audience hearing the psalm-song to respond with a doxology (praise of God) or a call to think and meditate on the message.

The word appears seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk 3. Scholars of the Hebrew language are uncertain about the root word from which it is derived. Some have speculated it to be an acronym or the like.

While the exact meaning remains obscured, scholars lean heavily toward it being some sort of musical notation because in thirty-one of the thirty-nine psalms with the caption “to the choir master” the term “selah” appears (*JewishEncyclopedia.com*).

If the guesses are correct and it is a musical or worship form notation, it bears little impact on our understanding of the message of the psalms in which it is found.

Types or Styles of Psalms

To better understand the various purposes of the psalms, it is possible to divide them into several groups, based on type or style.

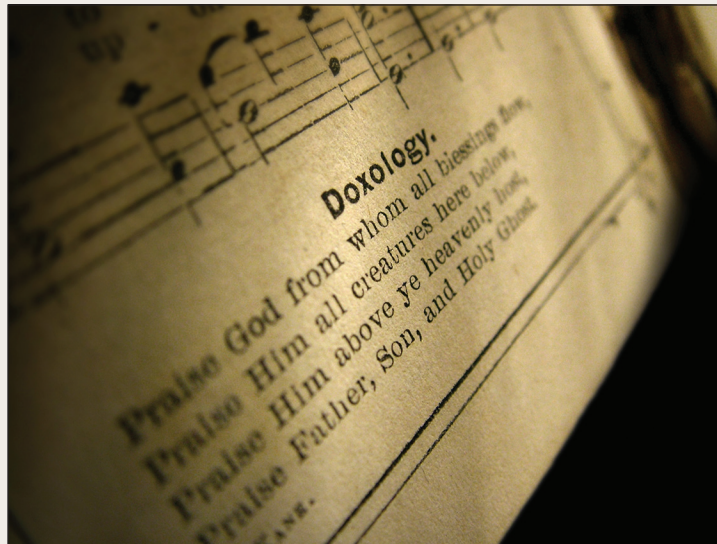
1. Didactic. These are psalms largely intended to teach or instruct God’s wisdom.

2. Worship. These are designed for specific use during worship, sung by a choir, perhaps responded to by other worshippers, etc.

3. Meditation. This group of psalms calls for serious consideration of certain divine truths and consideration of practical applications.

4. Praise and devotion. Like many of our hymns today, these extol God’s greatness and voice the worshipper’s commitment.

5. Prayer and petition. These entail actual messages the writer and, later, the reader/singers communicate to God.



Other Groupings or Categories

The Book of Psalms also can otherwise be categorized, based on unique characteristics that certain of the psalms share. As this study proceeds, we will be looking more intently at these categories.

Acrostic or alphabetic

These psalms are unique in that each line begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in sequential order. Psalm 119 is an example.

Royal

The kingship of God is the focus of these psalms. They use terms

like “the Lord reigns.” Closely associated with these are the Messianic psalms, focusing on the reign of God’s “anointed” or Christ. See Psalms 93 and 97 as exemplars.

Ethical

Moral principles are taught in these. Psalm 15 is a good example.

Hallelujah

These are praises of God with the words “Hallelujah” or “Praise the Lord” beginning or ending them. See Psalm 103 as an example.

Historical

In these the history of God’s people is brought to remembrance as teaching, edification, or admonishment. Psalms 105 and 106 are illustrative.

Thanksgiving

God is praised and thanked for His provisions. Psalms 86 and 100 would be examples.

Messianic

These are of great interest to Christians because they point forward to the work, life, and words of our Lord Jesus, sometimes directly,

sometimes indirectly. Psalm 53 would exemplify this form, as well as Psalm 2.

Songs of Ascent or Songs of Degrees

The exact purpose of these is not positively known, but many believe they were used on the feast day pilgrimages up to Jerusalem. Psalms 120-134 compose this group.

Penitential or Confession

These express repentance or laments for sins committed. The 51st psalm is the most famous, where David sorrows over his sin with Bathsheba. Others speak of the sins of the community of Israel.

Suffering

Psalm 102 is typical of this genre, where the cries of those suffering are verbalized to God.

Imprecatory

In these songs, God is asked to curse or bring evil or judgment

upon the enemies of God and God’s people. Psalms 35, 55, and 69 are examples.

Series or Complimentary

For example, some Bible students see in Psalms 22, 23, and 24 a series of psalms that speak of the

suffering Savior, the living Shepherd, and the exalted Sovereign, respectively. While each psalm differs in focus, together they picture the various roles of the Christ that was to come.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Look up the term “doxology” and see if you can find an expanded definition, as well as any description of its usual use in literature and song. Then, see if you can find any examples of such in the New Testament writings. After this research, write in a sentence or two why you believe the authors felt compelled to express such sentiments when and where they did. _____

2. List something new that you have learned from this lesson about the biblical psalms. How do you think this will benefit your understanding and use of this book of the Bible? _____

3. Look up the word “meditation” in a reference book or dictionary and write down its meaning. _____

Now, taking that general idea, write an explanation of how you think a Christian should go about meditating on God’s word. Be specific, perhaps even suggesting a methodology for accomplishing the meditation. Be ready to share your ideas in class. _____

4. Find an example of each of the following types of psalms:

Didactic (teaching): _____

Worship: _____

Meditation: _____

Praise: _____

Prayer: _____

5. Compose your own four-line psalm or poem, focusing on thanksgiving to God.

Lesson 3

The Unique Nature of Hebrew Poetry

Poetry is a form of writing that formulates a concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound, and rhythm. Its emotional content is expressed through a variety of techniques, from direct description to symbolism, including the use of metaphor and simile (*Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, Britannica.com).

Hebrew poetry shares with its English counterpart the characteristics described above. Yet, Hebrew poetry accomplishes such by a very different style and structure.

The sentences or lines of Hebrew poetry are much shorter than prose. The lines often contain about six words, often divided into two groups, each of about three words (known as a bi-colon).

Parallel Ideas Versus Parallel Sounds

To get the most out of Hebrew poetry, one must understand that little or no effort is made to rhyme words or sounds, as is often, but not always the case in English poetry. This is potentially another evidence of a divine hand in their construction because if sound had been

rhymed in Hebrew, it would have been totally lost when translated into other languages.

“But the most familiar feature of Hebrew poetry arises from the balance between successive lines. This is called parallelism,” notes *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*. It elsewhere is described as the “echo effect,” where the poetic structure matches words, phrases, lines, and thought sequences. The poems often grow in specificity and intensity. Psalms use language to evoke a response from the reader.

What is “rhymed,” repeated, or rearranged in Hebrew poetry are thoughts. These parallel thoughts are expressed in similar grammar, similar sentence length, and similar vocabulary.

Simple Parallelism Example:

a	b	c
The Lord	has heard	my supplication
The Lord	will receive	my prayer

Psalm 6:9

In this very simple example, above, notice how the subject (*Lord*) is the same in each line and that the verbs (*heard, receives*) are nearly synonymous, as are the objects of the lines (*supplication,*

prayer). Be particularly aware in this example that “supplication” and “prayer” are expressions for the same act. When looking at more complex psalms, this also will be helpful. English readers often try to parse great differences between two lines of Hebrew poetry, when the real purpose is either to emphasize by repetition or to expand upon the same idea by the use of a different word or phrase.

Psalm 11:4

The LORD is in His holy temple,
The LORD'S throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold,
His eyelids test the sons of men.

Understanding the principle of parallelism, notice that God's “holy temple” becomes synonymous with “heaven.”

Repeated Words: Psalm 29

- v. 3 The VOICE of the Lord is upon the waters. . .
- v. 4 The VOICE of the Lord is powerful, the VOICE of the Lord is majestic
- v. 5 The VOICE of the Lord breaks the cedars. . .
- v. 7 The VOICE of the Lord hews out flames of fire
- v. 8 The VOICE of the Lord shakes the wilderness
- v. 9 The VOICE of the Lord makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare. . .

Refrain: *Chorus-like repetition dividing psalm into sections.*

Read Psalm 107 and notice that verses 8, 15, 21, and 31 are identical. They serve as a refrain, not unlike the chorus in many of our worship hymns.



Each of those verses read: “*Oh that men would praise the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!*”

The repeated refrain both divides the psalm into sections and simultaneously and repeatedly calls upon men to acknowledge and express gratitude to the Lord. It also serves as emphatic repetition, calling particular attention to the importance found in the phrase.

Inclusio: *A bracketing or envelope form of repetition that occurs at the beginning and ending of a psalm or a major section of a psalm.*

Psalm 103 serves as an example of this form. Notice that the first words of the psalm and the last are identical—“Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

Chiasm: *A sequence of lines with a mirror relationship in which the first and last are parallel, the second and next to the last are parallel, the third and third from the last are parallel, etc.—so that the last half is in inverted order.*

Psalm 19:1 is a familiar psalm and demonstrates a simple example of this form in the structure of the Hebrew verse.

- A The heavens
- B declare
- C the glory of God

- C¹ His handiwork
- B¹ shows
- A¹ And the firmament

Again, notice the parallels. “Heavens” and “firmament” speak of the same thing. The verbs “declare” and “shows” convey the same idea and we can appropriately conclude a connection between “the glory of God” and His “handiwork.”

Not All Purely Synonymous

A purely synonymous poetic verse might be structured as:

Line A = Line B

However, it may be observed that some verses are more accurately described as:

Line A is so...Line B is also so

Basic Types of Parallelism

The paralleling of thoughts within the psalms presents itself in several forms. The most basic of these are:

1. Synonymous Parallelism

Here, two lines of the poem express fairly closely the same idea in different words.

Psalm 24:2

*For He has founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the waters.*

Psalm readers will observe that the parallel words in synonymous lines are not always exactly identi-

cal in meaning. Melvin D. Curry has pointed out that sometimes the second half “intensifies” the first phrase, as from “break” to “smash.” In other cases, he says, the second line “dramatizes” the first, as from “bow” to “lick the dust of your feet.” Or, the parallel word or phrase may “concretize” the first phrase, as from “wrath” to “flaming fury.” Finally, he suggests the parallel may “zoom in” on the first phrase, as from the general “cities of Judah” to “the courtyards of Jerusalem.”

John Goldingay suggests that the purpose of this expanded repetition can be to “underline” an idea or the “sharpen the point” in some way or “give it precision or clarify its ambiguity or complete it.”

2. Antithetic Parallelism

In this form, we have a thought or truth expressed or strengthened by contrast or opposition. Sometimes the single thought is expressed in both positive and negative modes.

Psalm 1:6

*For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

3. Synthetic Parallelism

This style presents a truth by having the first and second lines of

Exploring the Messages in Hebrew Poetry

When examining a psalm, look for the purpose or goal of the writer by:

1. Looking at the opening lines, which may identify the writer's intent.
2. Look for the plot or task, which may center on a conflict that needs resolution or may be a search for justice or call to faithful living
3. Look at the concluding lines to see if there is a renewed call to whatever the focus or purpose of the psalm might be.

There is generally a progressive movement of thought in the psalms, a development of a principle or idea that is first set forth and then elaborated upon.

the poem bear some relationship to one another. It may be a relationship of cause and effect or of proposition and conclusion.

Psalm 119:11

*Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You!*

There are other less common forms of parallelism, such as pro-

gressive (stair-like), climactic, and introverted parallelism.

Psalm 1:1 (*progressive*)

*Blessed is the man Who **walks** not
in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor **stands** in the path of sinners,
Nor **sits** in the seat of the scornful*

Psalm 29:1 (*climactic*)

Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones,

Give unto the LORD glory and strength.

Psalm 91:14 (*introverted*)

*Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he has known My name.*

Word Pictures in the Psalms

While not unique to Hebrew poetry, students need to recognize that the psalms present “word pictures” to help readers and singers visualize certain concepts. This is accomplished through the use of figures of speech, which provide comparison, contrast, emphasis or clarification.

Use a dictionary, grammar, and language handbook or other reference to define each of the following figures of speech. Examples of each are provided.

Simile: _____

Psalms 1:3; 1:4; 5:12; 17:8

What is the comparison? _____

Metaphor: _____

Psalms 23; 84:11; 91:4

What are these comparisons teaching? _____

Hyperbole: _____

Psalm 6:6; 78:27; 107:26

What is the point made by this figure of speech? _____

Anthropomorphism: _____

Psalms 31:2; 11:4; 18:15; 32:8

What parts of man’s body are assigned to God to convey some truth about God in these examples? _____

Personification: _____

Psalms 35:10; 77:16; 96:11; 104:19

What characteristics are assigned to the lifeless objects in these examples? _____

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Looking in the song book you use for worship, find a song whose chorus is identical for three or more verses of the song. Drawing upon what you’ve learned about repetition in Hebrew poetry, what do you think are the purposes of singing the same chorus words repeatedly in one song? _____

Look at other songs and see if you can find other types of repetition similar to that in Hebrew poetry.

2. Using Psalm 6:9 as your pattern, write your own two-line psalm or poem, repeating in some way the subject, verb, and object in each line. _____

3. Using Psalm 19:1 as your pattern, see if you can write a verse about a worshipful thought of your own, where you use chiasm (make the second line a mirror reverse of the idea in the first line).

a. _____

b. _____

4. Find the song “He’s My King.” Go through the song and list all the figures of speech you can find. _____

Do the same with the following songs: “Praise the Lord” and “Higher Ground.” And, if you like, choose another song to peruse for figures of speech. _____

Lesson 4

Psalms 1 and 150: Import of First and Last Psalms

Psalm 1 is an appropriate preface, preamble, or introduction to the entire book of Psalms in that it sets forth the way to blessedness (or happiness), contrasting it with the way of unrighteousness. These are two themes which recur numerous times in the remainder of the psalms. This psalm is general and basic, foundational for understanding the remainder of the psalms, perhaps the rest of the Bible. Two fundamental ways of life are contrasted, one black, one white.

In this psalm is revealed the blessedness of righteousness and the misery, desperation, and ill future of the wicked. In this regard it emphasizes the importance of God's presence in our lives. God's message, the Scriptures, is presented as crucial to man's well-being.

One commentator has written, "Psalm 1 constitutes a preemptive strike with regard to much that will follow in the Psalter. Prayers issuing from the

experience of attack, shame, fear, isolation, divine abandonment, and divine anger will dominate the first half of the Psalter. These prayers could give the impression that such experiences are characteristic of the life of the godly. The Psalter begins by affirming that this is not so."

It should be observed that what this psalm depicts

is not necessarily what appears to be the reality of present circumstances. Rather, it is the depiction of the ultimate outcome of choosing either the way of righteousness or the way of the wicked. Many of the psalms that follow will express how life for the righteous "feels" in the present. But, we must be called back to the message that introduces the psalms—the message of the ultimate end of these two approaches to life.

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Compare this text with Psalm 1. Are they just similar, or suggestive of the psalm's earlier origin?

The Blessedness of the Righteous Man—vv. 1-3

Notice how this short psalm begins with a conditional beatitude. The blessing (beatitude) ascribed is promised to the man who behaves in a particular way. This is also the manner in which Jesus opened His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

"Blessed" is an exclamatory word, conveying the idea of "O the blessedness of" whatever subject is addressed. It actually is a plural that could be translated "the blessednesses."

This concept of blessedness is somewhat hard to adequately define. Modern commentators often equate it with "happiness," which is useful if not complete in defining the concept. Perhaps it is best to acknowledge that God, in all His plans, laws, and actions works toward man's well-being. That broad state of spiritual and physical well-being, when attained, makes for a use-

Psalm 1

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.
The ungodly are not so,
But are like the chaff which the wind drives
away.
Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the
judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the
righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

ful, fruitful, joyful, contented, and happy existence. It is a blessed life. It is the life that all men seek, but only the righteous actually achieve.

The righteous man's character is first described *negatively* by three degrees of habit and conduct. He does not:

- **Walk** (go along, follow) the counsel of the ungodly
- **Stand** (stop, be firm) in the path of sinners (cf. Prov. 4:14-15)
- **Sit** (dwell, remain, abide) in the seat of the scornful (cf. Psa. 26:4-5)

Here we find an example of *progressive parallelism*, showing that he is not guilty of any of three progressive errors. He doesn't "walk" with the careless and ungodly who forget God. Neither does he "stand" openly and defiantly with purposeful sinners. And, he won't "sit" in the seat of the scornful, becoming a teacher of such evils and scorning or ridiculing truth.

An important truth is thrust upon us in this psalm. People can't remain passive or indifferent toward God and His word. Such passivity leads to progressively greater and greater sin.

Next, the man who will be blessed is described in a *positive* manner. He does:

- "Delight" in the law of the Lord, not seeing God's directives as some sort of curse to be borne, but as a useful rule for his life. Such a delight causes this man to be preoccupied with God's will for his life (cf. Pss. 40:8; 119:47-48).
- "Meditate" upon God's law day and night. Thus, his meditation is consistent and persistent. The study of God's word is not an occasional endeavor for this

Prepare to Discuss

Look up the meaning of the word *meditate*. Be ready to discuss how we accomplish meditation today.

man, but rather his work "day and night" (cf. Psa. 119:15-16, 97-99 and Josh. 1:7-8).

Finally, this man's prosperity is described. He is like a tree planted by rivers of water, deeply rooted, fruitful in its season. As a sign of his vitality, like the leaves of a well watered tree, his leaves do not wither. Whatever this man undertakes to do will prosper.

Notice that this isn't a wild tree, but one purposefully "planted" and cultivated. Compare this to the New Testament exhortation to fathers to bring their children up in the "training and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

The Desperate Situation of the Wicked Man—vv. 4-5

The ungodly man has nothing in common with the righteous. All that was said about the behavior and prosperity of the righteous is exactly the opposite of the wicked man.

The righteous man is compared, metaphorically, to a rooted, watered, flourishing "tree" while the wicked man is compared, metaphorically, to "chaff," which the wind blows away. Such have no root or fruit. As such, they present themselves as worthless and unstable.

These ungodly men are unable to do two important things:

1. They cannot stand (or withstand) in the day of judgment.

2. They cannot stand in the congregation or assembly of the righteous. (In New Testament thought, the Lord adds to the church [assembly] those who are saved. He does not add the wicked to that number. [See Acts 2:41, 47.])

Final Contrast of the Two Ways—v. 6

On the one hand, the Lord "knows" the way of the righteous. This certainly speaks of more than God simply being aware of these folks and their behavior. He knows them in a much more intimate and active sense. He watches over and protects them. Salvation in the day of judgment is equated with being known. In Matthew 7:23 it is recorded that Jesus said, "And then I will declare to them, 'I never *knew* you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'" In 2 Timothy 2:19 we read, "The Lord knows those who are His." Compare also Nahum 1:7.

Since the ungodly are not known by God, the psalm ends by declaring they will "perish."

Present Day Application

The introductory psalm of this great book of psalms teaches a fundamental lesson still critically needed today. God is the source of all that is good. All blessings flow from Him. And the means of access to these blessings of God is His word—the Holy Scriptures.

Word study

"Wicked" is a key word in the psalms. It will recur often, so research what this word means for class discussion.

"Ungodly" is another key word, whose meaning needs to be explored.

The greatest need of mankind is not health or financial security or even a general happiness. It is to know the ways of God and, in turn, to be known by God.

This world is so full of misery, degradation, and failure because the overwhelming majority of people are biblically illiterate, unaware, and little interested in God's revelation.

Psalm 1 serves not only as a fine introduction to the book of psalms but to the entire Bible. It could be an excellent place to start a discussion of God's word with unbelievers.

As Psalm 1 introduces and sets the tone for the whole book of Psalms, so Psalm 150 serves as a superb conclusion to all that is contained in the book. The Psalter begins with "Blessed is the man"

and ends with "Praise the Lord." Like Psalm 1, this final psalm has no title or author suggested.

The final psalm qualifies as a final and climactic doxology, an ultimate hymn of praise and worship of God, the logical and obvious reaction of all who learn the lessons conveyed in the great book of psalms. Ten times comes the exhortation to "Praise Him!" Franz Delitzsch suggests "ten is the number of rounding off, completeness, exclusiveness, and of the extreme exhaustableness."

It must be remembered that the psalm is written within the context of Old Testament worship, where instrumental music was, as we see here, authorized and commanded by God. Students of the New Testament Scriptures will observe that no direction or authority for such is given there, only the command to "sing" (Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16).

Likewise, dancing was a part of the worship of ancient Israel, but is nowhere commanded or exemplified in the New Testament. And, it is worth observing that all the examples of dancing in the Old Testament, given approval, were of males and females dancing separately and not in some sort of lustful man-

Research

See what you can find about the instruments mentioned. They may be different than our modern ones.

- Trumpet (cornet, horn)
- Lute (psaltery)
- Harp
- Timbrel
- Stringed instruments
- Flutes (pipes)
- Cymbals

ner. (See the celebratory dance of Miriam and the women after the Red Sea crossing, Exod. 15:20; and David's dance "before the Lord," 2 Sam. 6:14.)

The underlying message of this psalm is that praising God should be central in a man's life. If it is, the blessedness and prosperity ascribed to the righteous who delight in the instruction of God, in Psalm 1, will be realized.

Compare Psalms 146, 147, 148 and 149

While Psalm 150 caps the psaltery with praise, it should be noted that the preceding four psalms do likewise. Read through them and compare the praise presented. As a group they are sometimes referred to as the "Hallelujah Psalms."

Learning More about Worship

Many seek to compartmentalize their lives, making separate cubbyholes for their spiritual and temporal lives. Psalm 150 refutes this approach to life, urging us to praise God in every way, in every venue and with the totality of our lives.

We noted in an earlier lesson that each of the five sections of the book of Psalms concludes with a short hymn of praise, and

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD!
Praise God in His sanctuary;
Praise Him in His mighty firmament!
Praise Him for His mighty acts;
Praise Him according to His excellent
greatness!
Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet;
Praise Him with the lute and harp!
Praise Him with the timbrel and dance;
Praise Him with stringed instruments and
flutes!
Praise Him with loud cymbals;
Praise Him with clashing cymbals!
Let everything that has breath praise the
LORD.
Praise the LORD!

so it is not surprising that the entire psalm book composition is concluded with an emotional poetic call to praise God in every manner. The world needs to hear of His mighty character, of His greatness and desire to bless those who will listen to Him.

Notice that Psalm 150 not only calls upon readers to worship God, it also tells us something of the nature of worship. We are not to worship merely by mental contemplation of God’s greatness. We are to engage our minds, voices, bodies and hearts in that worship. The final summation of the psalm is a call for

Following the direction of Psalm 150, put a total effort into this effort of worship and praise.

universal praise of God with all the means and might available in man.

This final psalm is rapturous in its form, overflowing in its enthusiastic expression of praise.

A great number of the most popular songs and hymns sung in Christian worship today carry for-

ward the idea set forth in Psalm 150.

Class Activity

Choose one or more of the following hymns to sing in class, or a comparable song of praise of your choosing.

- “Alleluia”
- “Hallelujah! Praise Jehovah!”
- “Praise the Lord”
- “Worthy Art Thou”
- “Praise Him! Praise Him!”

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Discussed earlier was the negative progression of habit or conduct. We observed the progression from *walk* to *stand* to *sit* in Psalm 1. Look at those verses again to see if you observe any other progressions in the words.

Degrees of openness, fellowship, or involvement, seen in words: *counsel—path—seat* _____

Degrees of evil resulting, seen in the words: *wicked—sinners—scoffers* _____

2. What do you learn from Psalm 1 about the company you keep? _____

3. Explain your understanding of the metaphor in Psalm 1:3, where a righteous man is compared to a tree. Particularly, how is a man who delights in and meditates upon God’s word like a healthy, well-watered tree?

4. Taking the concept in 1:3 that “whatever” the righteous man does will prosper, and comparing that to New Testament passages, like Ephesians 1:3, 3:20; and Philippians 4:19, write down what you think is meant by the word “whatever.” Is this promising a problem-free life? _____
- _____
- _____
5. What characterizes a scoffer? Give some examples. _____
- _____
6. Give your own explanation of what Psalm 1:6 means when it says “For the LORD *knows* the way of the righteous.” _____
- _____
- _____
7. In what manner, or by what means, will a sinner “perish”? _____
- _____
- _____
8. Do you see anything in Psalm 150 that addresses the false notion that God can be worshipped out in the fishing boat or hiking through the woods through mere admiration of His creation? _____
- _____
- _____
9. Psalm 150 calls for God to be praised in His “sanctuary.” In your estimation, where or what is God’s sanctuary? _____
- The tabernacle or temple in Israel
 - Heaven
 - The church or individual members of the kingdom, who are the “temple” of God
 - All of these
 - Other
10. Make a list of six (6) attributes of God. Now, try to create a very simple psalm of six lines that speak of those attributes. (Remember, you don’t have to rhyme any words.)
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Look at Parallelism, etc.

Does the parallelism of the first two lines help in determining the nature of the sanctuary?

Praise God in His *sanctuary*;

Praise Him in His mighty *firmament*!

Or, does the reference to musical instruments suggest something different?

The book of Psalms is not even remotely a “historical” book in the sense of being a record of history. It is poetry. Yet, the history of humanity and particularly of Israel is interwoven in various ways throughout the psalms. As one commentator has put it, “History is the soil in which literature grows.”

It is impossible to properly interpret many of the psalms without an understanding of both the Genesis record of man’s creation and the promises God made to Abraham. Further, a number of the psalms appear to be written in the context of certain historical experiences of Israel’s most important earthly king, David. (*Lesson 6 will focus more fully upon David.*)

Sing

As you sing one or more of the following songs, notice how the historic events continue to provide instruction and helpful reassurance to Christians today.

“In the Desert of Sorrow and Sin”

“Rock of Ages”

“We’re Marching to Zion”

Israel’s religious experience and doctrinal blueprint were defined and accentuated by the history of God’s creation of mankind in His image, His covenant promises to Abraham, and the unfolding fulfillment of those promises. Thus, the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness provision, the receipt of the Promised Land and God’s presence among them in the temple and rule over them via their king, were all integrally tied together with their worship, and the psalms, in part, served as an expression of that worship.

Finding Israel’s Historical Roots in the Psalms

This may be a bit difficult for Western minds in America to fully appreciate. While we know that religion helped shape American history from the beginning, religion and history are not here as inextricably intertwined as it was in Israel.

As we continue to study the psalms we will see a historical backdrop in two ways:

1. General references and allusions to historical events of the past.
2. Specific historical events which form the context of a particular psalm.

Even as we emphasize the importance of history in interpreting the psalms, it is necessary to point out that readers often will have difficulty trying to determine the exact historical context of many, maybe most, of the psalms. This is due to the lack of clear historical markers in the psalms and the fact that poetry often utilizes an indeterminate means of expression. While prose seeks to be precise, poetry circumvents the general reality and states only the essential.

Event	Psalm
Creation of earth, man	104:1-4, 8
Flood	29:10
Covenant with Abraham	105:9-12, 42
Joseph’s trip to Egypt	105:17
Joseph’s imprisonment	105:18
Joseph’s deliverance, exaltation	105:20-22
Famine in Egypt	105:16
Israel’s bondage in Egypt	105:25
The plagues on Egypt	78:12, 43-51; 105:28-36
Deliverance from Egypt	81:6
Red Sea divided	78:13; 136:13-15
Wilderness journey	68:7
Water from smitten rock	78:15-16
Manna and quail given	78:24-29
Calf worship at Horeb	106:19-20
Inheritance of Promised Land	105:44; 136:21-22
Israel’s disloyalty in the land	78:55-58
Babylonian Exile	137

Key Historical Characters Mentioned

A number of characters who played pivotal or consequential roles in Israel's history are mentioned in the psalms. These include Abraham, Melchizedek, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, Moses, Aaron, and David

Geographical Locations of Historic Importance

One of the ways past history emerges in the psalms is through reference to places of historic significance, such as Zion, Sinai, and Hermon; tribal regions such as Judah, Benjamin, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and troublesome areas surrounding the nation, like Moab, Philistia, Edom, Amalek, and Tyre.

Historical Events Focused upon in Psalms

The following is an abbreviated list of events mentioned or alluded to in various psalms.

Importance of the Historical Themes to Understanding Message of Psalms

Again, these historical events and the people who were involved in them are central to the message of the various psalms, whether they are psalms of praise, joy or worship, or of lament and pleadings for help. Even the Messianic messages are painted against the background of previous salvation experiences.

Creation

God's creative power defines His nature, as well as the nature of His human creation. It is cause for praise, wonder, and glory. The heavens declare the glory of God (19:1). And the Israelite who wor-

Historical Events Press Common Themes

The historical characters and events are not presented in the psalms as merely a reiteration of history but as evidence of God's love, mercy, and power to bring salvation, as well as His power to judge His people's enemies and correct those in Israel who forget Him.

By looking at God's past actions, individuals, as well as the nation, are encouraged to trust God to help in current and future travails.

These past acts also serve as a type and basis of faith in the coming salvation to be effected by the Messiah on the cross.

Three psalms are particularly full of historical allusions—78, 105, and 106.

ships Jehovah can see cause for thanksgiving and hope because his God is the Creator of heaven and earth and of man himself.

Exodus

God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt, more than any other event, demonstrated the faithfulness of God to His covenant promise to Abraham. It is at once a salvation event and fulfillment of the promise to create a mighty nation.

But, it also serves as the basis of poetic laments accompanied by appeals for God to repeat an Exodus-like rescue and redemption (see Pss. 44, 77, 80).

In other psalms, remembrance of the Exodus is cause to break forth in praise of God and thanksgiving (see Pss. 66, 68, 114, 135, 136).

Three other psalms recount the Exodus story, historically, contrasting God's faithfulness to Israel with the nation's unfaithfulness to Him. The story of deliverance is retold to inspire repentance and a return to the Great Deliverer (Pss. 78, 105, 106).

Sinai

Sinai is mentioned directly only in Psalm 68, but the events there are alluded to elsewhere in the book. This place is symbolic of many things central to Israel's existence as the people of God. There, God took up residence among His people in the tabernacle. There the law was given, worship patterns established and God's sovereignty established.

Read Psalms 78 and 99 and observe how events at Sinai play into them. Negative things happened at Sinai also.

Observe references to these sins in Psalm 106.

The Wilderness Wandering

Psalm 95 offers the clearest assessment of the wilderness era.

*For forty years I was grieved
with that generation,
And said, "It is a people who go
astray in their hearts,
And they do not know My ways."
So I swore in My wrath,
"They shall not enter My rest."*

Psalm 78 reflects upon Israel's rebellion throughout the wilderness sojourn, as well as on God's great patience and forbearance. The time in the wilderness was a period of instructing Israel for future generations, and so is used in some of the psalms. Several references are made to God's plagues and judgments on His people during the period.

Conquest

Next to the exodus, the most frequently mentioned period of history in the Psalms is the conquest. Psalm 105:11 recalls God's covenant promise of the land to Abra-



Mountains in the wilderness of Sinai

ham. The land was both a promise and a gift from God, as Psalm 44:2-3 illustrates. The placing of Israel in Canaan is compared to God planting them as a vineyard (80:8-11). That God was the conqueror of the land, and not Israel, is expressed in Psalm 78:54-64, and Psalms 135 and 136 recall how God struck down powerful kings to fulfill the second of His promises to Abraham.

Davidic reign

David’s reign as God’s servant or shepherd-king is also an important historical focus of the psalms. (*Lesson 6 will explore this further.*)

Exile and return

No historic event in Israel’s history was as devastating as the

exile in Babylon. But, it also served to initiate a reformation that would keep the nation viable and able to serve as the conduit for God’s final covenant promise to Abraham—a blessing for the whole world through the Messiah.

And, like the Exodus, the return prefigures the salvation to be brought by Jesus’ death for sin. The expressions of despair in Babylon create a physical pattern of the condition of sinful mankind in general. And, the voice of joy over deliverance anticipates the joy of salvation from sin.

Notice how the psalmist in Psalm 106 seems to appeal from bondage for God’s forgiveness and

deliverance. The cry is “save us!” Then, read Psalm 107 and hear the psalmist pour forth thanks in expectation of that redemption.

For an expression of the misery of the captivity, explore Psalm 137, and to hear the expression of joy upon release, read Psalm 126.

Summary

The above merely highlights the mountaintops of Israelite history as reflected in the psalms. But, notice how Israel’s history, from its beginnings as a nation to its post-exile restoration, is reflected upon and used in a wide variety of ways.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. How does the history of creation in Genesis teach us about God? _____

2. What does the history of the Exodus from Egypt teach us about God? _____

Also, can you think of anything or any ways in which the Exodus is a model or lesson for us today? _____

3. Mt. Sinai is a place in the southern Sinai Peninsula in present-day Egypt. But, when you think of this place—what are some of the thoughts that first rush to your mind? _____

4. List six things that occurred during the wilderness wandering of Israel. Having done this, now list anything spiritual that may seem to you to be a parallel.

5. What do you think is the key lesson we learn about God from the Bible’s historical record of the conquest of Canaan? _____

Although Christians don’t view the conquest of Canaan as part of *our* national history, we do draw images from that history which we apply in our faith. Give three examples? _____

6. What does the historical event of Israel’s exile in Babylon teach you about God, sin, and God’s plan for man’s redemption? _____



This tomb painting shows a man singing with his musical instrument.

The twenty-third psalm is one of the most quoted passages in all of Scripture. Often among the first memory verses of the young, quoted by the aged and used at funerals to comfort grieving friends and family, the psalm really isn't about death, but about living. Daily activities such as eating, drinking, and seeking security are put in a God-centered perspective. It shows each man's need for a "shepherd," for God's guidance and aid, as well as a close relationship with Him. It is a psalm of trust and confidence.

This psalm declares the happiness or blessedness of the man whom God protects and cares for. It is a psalm of complete trust, with no pleas made.

As familiar as the psalm is to so many, there is much more to its message than is generally assumed. It is not particularly the tranquil psalm many seem to see. It does tell what the Lord provides, but it also speaks of "the valley of the shadow of death," as well as of "evil" and "enemies" and issues that will so trouble and weary the soul that it must be "restored."

We have noted previously that the Book of Psalms, while not generally classed among the books of prophecy, nevertheless often is prophetic in its function. The twenty-third psalm is an excellent example of this, pointing forward to Jesus, the ultimate and incarnate image of the Divine Shepherd.

While the psalm is titled "A psalm of David" and certainly could

have been written by him about any of a number of experiences in his life, its authorship is not absolutely certain. The title could, conceivably mean a psalm *about* David or *for* David or the Davidic monarchy and all that entailed. On the other hand, David was as a boy a simple shepherd and as a man a shepherd-king, and in many ways, he served as a type of the Shepherd-Messiah to come. All this said, opinions will

vary and it is best not to be dogmatic about the human authorship.

Those who conclude David was the author still express a wide range of opinions about when it was written during his life. Some believe he wrote it as a youth, while out there on the Judean hills with his father's flock around him. Others surmise he wrote it as an old man, approaching the end of life, looking back at how God had cared for him. Still others guess that it might have been written during one of the challenging episodes of his life, such as when he faced Goliath. Each view is inconclusive, even as we measure their merits.

Historical Background

It should be remembered that the early Israelites were a semi-nomadic people. The patriarchs had flocks and herds. Moses was called to his great mission to shepherd Israel out of Egypt while shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law in Midian. And, as mentioned earlier, David emerged in history as a shepherd boy to become the shepherd-king of Israel, a man after God's own heart.

The Twenty-Third Psalm

A Psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the
presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD
Forever.

While this psalm usually is read with the intent of making a very personal and individual application (“the Lord is *my* shepherd”), it may also be considered a reflection on Israel’s historical experience as God shepherded them through the Sinai wilderness, providing for their every need, and ultimately bringing them to possession of the land of Canaan. (Read Psalm 80, which even more clearly ties God’s shepherd role to the Exodus.)

If, indeed, part of this psalm is intended as historical reflection on the past, it is not unique here. Often in Scripture, faith and perseverance are urged for present and future by a backwards look to God’s workings and provision during the Exodus period. God’s past actions form the basis of confidence in His future actions. All trust is built in similar manner.

It would be a major omission to fail to recall that God Himself is often referred to, directly or indirectly, as the Shepherd of Israel (Pss. 74:1; 77:20; 78:52; 79:13; 80:1; Isa.40:11; Ezek. 34:6-19; Mic. 7:14). The very first allusions to God as shepherd may be found in Genesis 48:15 and 49:24.

A number of other psalms make reference to God’s people being the “sheep” of the Lord’s pasture (74:1; 79:13; 95:7; and 100:3-4). Thus, it is as important to absorb the concept of being sheep, metaphorically, as it is to envision God in the role of shepherd.

The Shepherd Model

The shepherd of the Middle East guided and provided for his sheep. He would lead the sheep to often hard to find green pastures

in an otherwise rocky and barren landscape. He and the animals had to traverse craggy, dangerous mountain regions to find both grass and life-reviving water, so he had to find the safest path. He maintained his reputation or name as a capable and trustworthy shepherd by keeping the well-being of his charges uppermost in his priorities.

The shepherd’s job went beyond guidance and provision. He also had to be the comforter or protector of the flock. In dark, dangerous, gloomy valleys where wild animals or robbers might attack, he carefully led the flock, armed with his rod and staff to ward off enemies and rescue sheep that wandered or fell into places of danger.



The image of the shepherd is not always to be perceived as a gentle, pastoral one. It was sometimes a despised occupation. The shepherd often had to be rough and tough, to defend the sheep. David illustrated such toughness when he faced and killed Goliath, standing up for God’s sheep (frightened Israel). Such toughness gives the sheep reason not to fear.

Structure of the Psalm

There is no complete consensus among students of this psalm about its structure, but two main views are held.

1. That the entire psalm speaks of God’s shepherd role.
2. That the psalm is divided into two parts:
 - God’s shepherd role, vv. 1-4
 - God’s role as “host” of His temple or dwelling among men, vv. 5-6

There is little disagreement about the first four verses, but considerable dispute about whether the last two continue the same focus, or refocus on the Lord’s provision at His temple.

One’s choice of views may be partially predicated by how the phrase “You prepare a table before me” is interpreted. If, as Arnold B. Rhodes suggests, it is a picture of a sheik-host to whose tent the psalmist has fled from his enemies, then a second figure, beyond that of the shepherd and sheep may be in view. It then would be a picture of a great banquet, gracious and protective hospitality and accompanying anointing with perfumed oil. Close fellowship with God is presented elsewhere in Scripture in the picture of a great feast.

On the other hand, if the “table” references the “tableland” or mesa-like areas in the mountains where the grass is abundant, the final verses may be a continuation of the shepherd-sheep theme. Or, one may need to consider a mixing of metaphors.

Either view largely conveys the picture of fellowship with God, of dwelling with Him in His “house.” Again, whether that house is the tabernacle/temple, specifically, or just the general idea of being in the Lord’s presence, is open to discussion.

God's Name in the Psalm

In this psalm, where we see the word LORD, the actual Hebrew word is one of seven variations of God's name, Jehovah.

- Jehovah-rohi, the Lord my shepherd, v. 1
- Jehovah-shalom, the Lord my peace, v. 2 (cf. Judg. 6:24)
- Jehovah-ropheka, the Lord my health, v. 3 (cf. Exod. 15:26)
- Jehovah-tsidkenu, the Lord my righteousness, v. 3 (cf. Jer. 23:6)
- Jehovah-shammah, the Lord my companion, v. 4 (cf. Ezek. 48:35)
- Jehovah-nissi, the Lord my victory, v. 5 (cf. Exod. 17:15)
- Jehovah-jireh, the Lord my provision, v. 6 (cf. Gen. 22:14)

Key Ideas in the Psalm

A number of highly emotive concepts and phrases make this psalm both highly memorable and instructive.

The Lord is my shepherd

If one declares this truth, it means the Lord:

- Owns you and controls your life
- Commands and we listen to His voice and obey His commands

I shall not want

This is the central message of the psalm. With the Lord as shepherd, the sheep lack nothing. The apostle Paul wrote the same idea in Philippians 4:19.

He makes me lie down in green pastures

There is an interesting fact about sheep. They will not lie down when they are hungry. But, when they have eaten and are full, they will lie down in the abundant grass.

He leads me by the still waters

Sheep farmers and herders tell us that sheep won't drink from rushing, roaring streams. In the

mountains of Palestine, shepherds often had to dam mountain streams to provide still water for their sheep. Still waters bring to mind peace of mind, calmness, and serenity. Again, we see parallel promises in the New Testament (Phil. 4:6-7; John 14:27).

He restores my soul

When does a sheep need to be restored? In the language of sheep rearing, a "cast sheep" is one that has gotten down and can't get up on its own. Without help it could easily just die in that position. Such is a beautiful analogy for the Christian, who can "get down" either in spirit or through sinful behavior and not be able to get up without aid. In Luke 15 Jesus tells the story of the man with 100 sheep who leaves the 99 to rescue or restore the one lost.

The word "restores" is a much stronger term than it might first appear. In Hebrew it literally means "he brings back my soul" or "turns back to the starting point." Thus it speaks of either a restoration of life itself, or at least life's vitality through rescue or a healing of wounds.

New Testament Comparison

What sort of terms can you think of in the New Testament that describe a restoration of life, effected by Christ?

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake

The Lord's leading is another central theme of this psalm. Sheep are "led," not "driven," so the shepherd must go ahead of the flock. Think of how true this is of Jesus. Look particularly at John 14:1-3.

"For his name's sake" impresses the idea that what is at stake in

life is not the fulfillment of human will, but God's will, so that God's name, glory, and wisdom will be extolled to all men.

Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

Palestine had many dark, dangerous valleys through which sheep had to travel. Yet, with the Lord as shepherd the danger is totally mitigated. Again, the New Testament teaches the same principle in Hebrews 13:5-6.

Also, observe Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 9:1-2, as recorded in Matthew 4:15-16 and consider whether the context is the same or different.

Discuss

How differently the Christian views death than the non-Christian?

His rod and staff comfort me

Whether two different objects are in mind here is open to debate. However, the shepherd's rod or staff was a tool of defense, a weapon of power, and a symbol of authority. And, in this manifold way they comforted the sheep. The crook in the rod is believed to have been used to rescue sheep from crevices and pits.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

As discussed earlier, the "table" may be viewed a couple of different ways. Key to either view is the fact that the Lord has "prepared" this table for His sheep. And, these blessings were prepared while our enemies were standing about us. The parallels in the work of Jesus are notable.

The concept of eating with the Lord is threaded throughout Scripture, from the animal sacrifices used in Old Testament worship, many of

which were shared between God and the people (fat burned and rose as sweet smell to Lord and people ate remainder) to the Lord's Supper or communion meal of the New Testament. Such meals or the symbolism inherent in them, reflect a close relationship. Christians are urged to hospitality, to reflect or create similar loving, caring relationships. Enemies are unable to impede God's provision.

Sing "Higher Ground"

Notice the phrase in the chorus that reads: "Lord, lift me up and let me stand, by faith, on heaven's tableland."

What do you think that means?

You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over

Anointing with oil had more than one purpose. Kings and priests were anointed to initiate their service to God. The term "Christ" means "anointed." Oil also was used medicinally and in hospitality, and the idea of a cup running over reiterates the idea of abundant provision by God.

With this line and those that follow, the psalmist's delight in God reaches its climax. Having reflected on God's present and former provision, he now makes a trusting mental leap into the future and foresees God's eternal provision.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life

You can hear the sense of confident trust, the certainty, and hope in these words. The words also carry a sense of thankfulness and ought to describe the life of everyone who follows in the Lord's steps.

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever

To live in the Lord's house is to be in His presence. God planted His tabernacle in the very midst of Israel's tents in the wilderness. His temple was built in the capital of the nation. Here is painted the picture of perfectly satisfied sheep looking to the future. Again, one can easily leap from the original picture in ancient Israel to the spiritual condition of the Christian. This desire to perpetually be in the Lord's house is a repeated theme of the psalms (27:4; 26:8; 65:4; 84:4).

And Christians should not fail to comprehend that the church is described as the "house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15).

The Psalm Can Be Read from Many Points of View

A survey of commentators on the psalm reveals a myriad of ideas about the original context of this famous song. And, while good interpretative protocol calls for trying to establish the writer's original meaning and application, that seems nearly impossible in this case, because the psalm itself gives us little or no explicit information about what triggered its expression.

Among the ideas suggested as the historical root of the psalm are: (1) The Exodus of Israel from Egypt; (2) when David was fleeing from King Saul; (3) the period when David was fleeing from his son Absalom; (4) the time of Israel's return from Exile. It is relatively easy to see any of these fitting the thoughts expressed in the psalm.

Yet, the psalm's indefinite nature makes it capable of transcending any single historical event. The psalm can be, and often is, applied with a purely Christian perspective, without any harm.

Singing the Psalms

Sing the following in class.

"The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want"

"Jesus the Loving Shepherd"?

The poetic form gives license for millions, if not billions, of individuals to particularize its meaning in the context of their own experiences with God. In this way, perhaps, the psalm helps explain the living nature of God's word, as Hebrews 4:12 explains, "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Foreshadowing of New Testament Concepts

Out of the types and shadows of the Old Testament emerge even more concrete images of God's shepherd role. From physical imagery we are catapulted in the New Testament to even higher truth. Jesus announced Himself as the "good shepherd" who "gives His life for the sheep." He knows His sheep and they know His voice. He gives them "eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:1-30).

Jesus is a shepherd not only in the feeding and guiding aspect, but more especially in protecting and comforting and rescuing. "Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in

His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Peter describes Jesus as the “chief shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4) and the “shepherd and bishop of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). His description of Jesus in the first case follows His inspired direction to the elders of the church to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). See also Acts 20:28.

Message for Today

The twenty-third psalm is extremely relevant today. While American ideals and mythology accentuate independence and self-sufficiency, the truth of Jeremiah 10:23 remains just that—truth. “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.”

And, the psalm, while written long before the coming of Jesus,

seems yet to foretell our need for the “good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). Isaiah, in particular, alluded to this development of the “shepherd” concept when he clearly pointed to the Christ, saying, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (53:6). Read also Matthew 9:36.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. After reading this psalm again, write down any situation that has arisen in your past or present life where the ideas and emotions of this psalm have been a comfort or help to you. _____

2. What is the most important message in this psalm to you? _____

3. What characteristics do sheep have that make them an excellent metaphor of the human condition? _____

4. In what ways would Israel, while in the Sinai desert, have been like sheep and God like a shepherd? List some of the things God did for Israel in the wilderness that parallel the message of Psalm 23. _____

5. In what ways were the kings of Israel to function like shepherds? _____

6. List all the ways you can think of in which Jesus fulfills the model of the shepherd. _____

7. How do you “feel” when you read this psalm? _____

8. How does this psalm address human weakness? _____

9. How might the “valley of the shadow of death” be viewed, beyond the issue of physical death? _____

10. How does this psalm express gratitude? _____

Psalms Relating to David's Life

As we saw in an earlier lesson, the psalms make reference to historical events in which God has revealed, saved, and judged. Though Christians live under a new covenant, we worship the same God as did Israel. His nature or character has not changed. But, as we read the psalms, it is important to first look at God's character as seen in His historical dealings with Israel, because these psalms were written in the context of physical Israel, not the spiritual one (the church). Once whatever historical context available is gleaned, Christian readers are better positioned to make contemporary applications.

A number of the psalms are either by or about David. So, it will be valuable to study the biblical story about him, as revealed in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. For example, as demonstrated in our last lesson on Psalm 23, the fact that David served as a shepherd in his youth and as a shepherd-king in his adulthood, adds considerably to our understanding of that psalm.

We learn also in those historical books that David was both a musician and psalmist (1 Sam. 16:15-23;

2 Sam. 1:17-27; 22:1; 23:1-7). The latter passage speaks of "the oracles of David," implying he was also a prophet, which is confirmed in Acts 2:30. Thus, it will not be surprising when we find prophetic elements in some of the psalms.



In an earlier lesson we noted that there are questions about whether all of the seventy-three psalms inscribed as "A psalm of David" are to be viewed as written by David. However, it seems that some undoubtedly are his. For example, Psalm 110 almost certainly must be of Davidic origin because Jesus spoke of it as such. "For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.' Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord';

how is He then his Son?" (Mark 12:36-37).

Likewise, Peter's argument from Psalm 16, which he links with Psalm 110, also depends upon David being the author (Acts 13:33-37). In Romans 4:6-8 Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2 as being from David, and the early church, praying, quoted David via Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25-26).

The great value in linking David's life to any psalms written by him or about him is that we can see, hear, and maybe feel the truths expressed coming alive in the life of a real person. David speaks, not theoretically, but in expression of his experience. When a Bible reader can relate faith, trust, obedience, and hope to real life situations, it is invaluable in then making personal applications.

Since David so boldly expresses his feelings about so many things in his life which may parallel our own experiences, he shows us the right way even while being terribly honest about his feelings and failings. Even when he writes of having done wrong, he shows us how to return to the right path—and righteousness.

Information in the Superscriptions

As we have noted briefly in an earlier lesson, some of the information in the superscriptions that precede many of the psalms doesn't make the authorship, point, or purpose of those psalms perfectly clear. Those headed "A psalm of David" may be written *by* David, or be written *about* David or *for* David. The Hebrew language would allow

for such a variation in the preposition.

But, other superscriptions or titles are “historical” in nature. Take for example Psalm 3, which is headed “A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son.”

Other historical superscriptions read:

- Psalm 7: “A Meditation of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning the words of Cush, a Benjamite.”
- Psalm 18: “A Psalm of David the servant of the Lord, who spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”
- Psalm 34: “A Psalm of David when he pretended madness before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he departed.”
- Psalm 51: “A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet sent to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”
- Psalm 52: “A Contemplation of David when Doeg the Edomite went and told Saul, and said to him, ‘David has gone to the house of Ahimelech.’”
- Psalm 54: “A Contemplation of David when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, ‘Is David not hiding with us?’”
- Psalm 56: “A Michtam of David when the Philistines captured him in Gath.”
- Psalm 57: “A Michtam of David when he fled from Saul into the cave.”
- Psalm 59: “A Michtam of David when Saul sent men, and they watched the house in order to kill him.”
- Psalm 60: “A Michtam of David. For teaching. When he fought against Mesopotamia

and Syria of Zobah, and Joab returned and killed 12,000 Edomites in the Valley of Salt.”

- Psalm 63: “A Psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah.”
- Psalm 142: “A Contemplation of David. A prayer when he was in the cave.”

David Had Two Great Periods of Trouble

Even where the superscriptions give us no help, a number of psalms seem to address circumstances very similar to those David experienced. Two different times in his life David experienced great trouble or crisis.

1. Before he was king, when Saul persecuted him and sought to kill him.
2. Later, as king, when his son, Absalom sought his life and he had to flee.

We will, for the purpose of this study, divide David’s life into several parts and attempt to explore some of the psalms that relate to each period.

The Early Days

Saul was the first king of Israel. We learn in 1 Samuel 15 that God decided to take the rule of Israel away from him after his capture of Agag, king of Amalek and his failure to obey God. In the next chapter, we read of Samuel being sent to the house of Jesse to anoint his youngest son, David, as the next king. At the time, David is serving as a simple shepherd.

Psalm 23, which we studied in our last lesson, most obviously draws upon the experiences of this

period and describes God as being David’s shepherd.

His Days of Exile

Of the psalms historically tied to David’s life, most relate to the period when David had to flee from King Saul. This spanned the period from Samuel initially anointing David to Saul’s death and David’s enthronement (1 Sam. 21-31).

Read Psalm 7. The superscription says it was a meditation sung concerning the words of “Cush, a Benjamite.” Who this Cush refers to is not clearly understood, though some think it refers to King Saul himself, who was a Benjamite.

- The danger David faced is described in the first two verses and a prayer offered.
- David expresses his innocence and the unjustness of his persecution in verses 3-5.



Although built long after his time, Absalom’s Pillar in the Kidron Valley of Jerusalem commemorates David’s son.

- He calls upon God to rise up in judgment on his enemies in verses 6-10.
- David then describes how God deals with the unrighteous in verses 11-16.
- David then concludes by saying he will praise God (v. 17).

Read Psalm 11. In this psalm he appears to have been advised to “flee to the mountains.” He ultimately, however, flees to God.

1. After reading the first three verses, list what you perceive to have been the general crisis or challenge. _____

2. Now, read the remainder of the psalm and record what you think David knew or learned that sustained him in this time of challenge. _____

Read Psalm 52. The superscription specifically identifies the historical incident behind this psalm. In 1 Samuel 22 we learn that Doeg’s report to King Saul later ended in a massacre of priests who had assisted David.

- Doeg’s wickedness is described in verses 1-4.
- God’s vengeance is threatened upon Doeg in verses 5-7.
- David sums up his psalm by praising God for both vengeance and protection.

Read also Psalms 18, 54, 56, 57, 59 and 142, which also describe this period of flight from King Saul.

His Days as King

After Saul’s death, David becomes king. While the volume of psalms, during this period, are not as great as during his times of trou-

ble, there are a few psalms which represent David’s expressions as God’s monarch over Israel.

Read Psalm 20. What do you find in this psalm that suggests it was written during David’s reign?

Read Psalm 21. How would you characterize the message of this psalm, in general?

Read Psalm 24. Even though David is the earthly king, to whom does he ascribe the honor of being the “king of glory”?

Read Psalm 30. This was a song sung at the dedication of the house of David.

Read also Psalms 60, 68.

Expressions of Repentance

Though David is forever identified as the “man after God’s own heart,” he also gravely sinned at times. The greatest of these times, recorded in Scripture, involved his adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of the king’s soldiers. He subsequently had Uriah killed to cover up his sin. God then sent Nathan the prophet to expose and convict the king. David genuinely repented and was forgiven and in his psalms expresses profoundly his feelings about the whole matter (2 Sam. 11-12).

Read Psalm 32.

1. What do you learn about forgiveness from this psalm? _____

2. What do you learn about confession of sins? _____

3. What do you learn about the Lord’s mercy? _____

Read Psalm 51.

1. List terms David uses in connection with God’s forgiveness of his sins. _____

2. Record what you can learn from this psalm about the nature and impact of sin. _____

His Chastisement

While God forgave David his sin with Bathsheba, He did chastise him nevertheless. It began with the death of the first child he had with Bathsheba and continued with internal family problems and ultimately reached its highest point when his own son, Absalom, tries to seize his father’s throne, resulting in David having to flee for his life from Jerusalem (2 Sam. 13-19).

A number of psalms appear to have been written during this period, including Psalms 26-28.

Read Psalm 31.

1. What in the psalm might be in reference to being hunted by Absalom? _____

Another group of psalms that may fit into this time period are Psalms 38-41.

Exploration question: If God forgave David, why was the king still being chastised? If God forgives us of our sins, does that mean all the temporal consequences of our sins will disappear? What

conclusions do you reach from this exploration?

Read Psalm 53, again. While we studied this psalm earlier as possibly fitting into or referring to David's earliest years as a shepherd, re-read it and consider if it might fit into the time period we are now studying.

There are a number of psalms which speak of David in his times of trouble. It is sometimes diffi-

cult to determine whether this was when Saul sought his life or when Absalom chased him or some other unidentified time. These include Psalms 61-64, 69-70, 86, and 143.

Songs of the Fugitive

Read Psalm 3. This psalm is specifically identified in its superscription as relating to the time period when David was a fugitive from Absalom.

1. How do you think you would handle one of your children turning on you and even wanting to kill you? _____

2. How did David handle it? _____

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Reflect on your life experiences. Choose one of each of the following and write a four-line psalm or song that expresses your feelings about that event or how you handled it.

Time of great joy: Birth of baby, graduation, marriage, obedience to gospel, etc. _____

Time of great trouble: Death in family, a sin you committed, marriage failure, etc. _____

2. Thought question: Does it help you at all to verbalize or write (express) your feelings in this way? Explain.

3. What is your favorite hymn? _____
Why do you think you like that one? _____

4. Is there anything new you have learned about David, after reading the psalms he wrote during the various periods of his life? _____

5. What is the value of a song or psalm, written by someone else, for us (you)? _____

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.

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.

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.

In the previous lesson, we looked at Messianic psalms in general. Now, we'll look at a sampling of those psalms in more detail. Students will observe that some psalms clearly and directly focus upon the coming Christ, while others do so much more obliquely.

Put another way, the term Messiah or "anointed one" can have a historical root, referencing a king or David specifically. On the other hand, the term Messiah can be used in an eschatological sense, referring to a future person who is in ways superhuman and undertaking a superhuman task.

Messiah or "anointed one" can refer to a king (or David specifically) or to a future person who is in ways superhuman and undertaking a superhuman task.

Psalm 22: The Psalm of the Cross

Previously, it was noticed that Jesus spoke some of the words of this psalm while He hung upon the cross dying. Shortly before He expired, He cried out the opening words of this psalm, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Jesus' utterance of the first words of Psalm 22 likely were intended to draw our attention not merely to those few words quoted from the psalm before us, but to the entirety of the psalm.

Instead of causing us to debate whether, or how, God "forsook" His Son, we are called to see that the happenings at Golgotha had been poetically pictured ten centuries earlier. Greg Litmer, in *Messianic*

The Messianic Psalms (2)

Prophecies, lists six clear Messianic pointers in this psalm:

1. Jesus was forsaken (v. 1).

David may have felt similarly, at times, when pursued by King Saul or his son, Absalom. But, it is in Jesus as He hangs on the cross bearing the penalty of the sins of the world that these words are most fully realized. We know that God has no fellowship with sin (Isa. 59:2). Jesus' use of the words demonstrate that they couldn't have been talking of David, alone.

2. The Lord dies with a broken heart.

"I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within Me" (v. 14). Jesus' physical suffering is so great that the very innermost part of His being "melts." Hope of life, in the natural sense, departs. Most discussions of the Lord's death during the communion supper focus on His physical suffering. The words before us now give insight into His emotional exhaustion as He sacrifices Himself for the world's sin.

3. It is foretold that Jesus' hands and feet would be "pierced."

Verse 16 gives an interesting detail of the Lord's death, one that anticipates the Roman form of

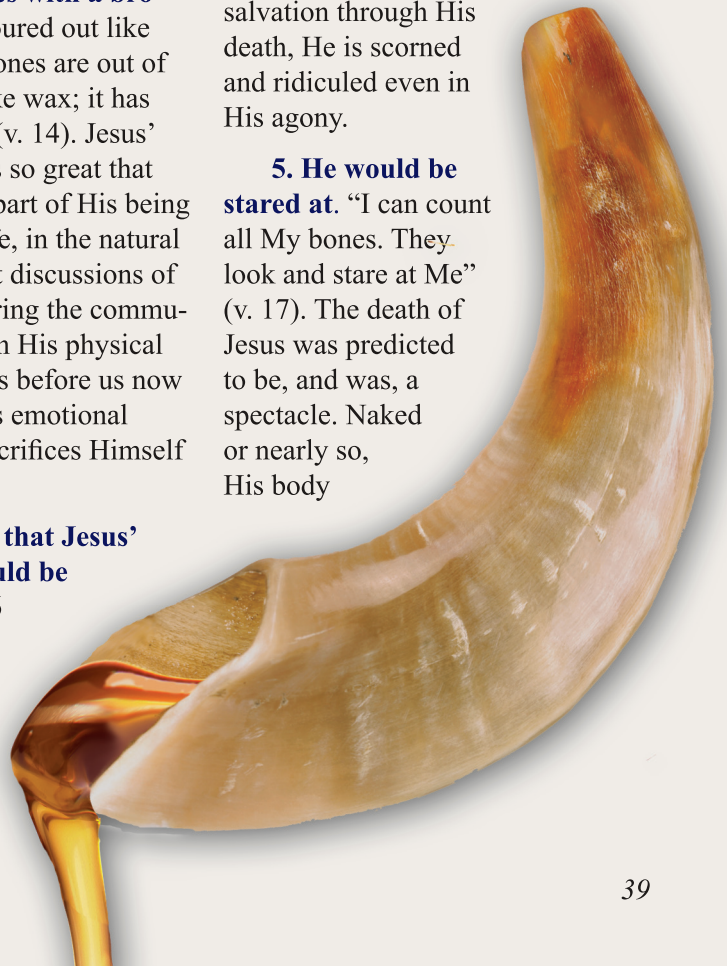
execution, in contrast to Israel's mode, which was stoning. There is hardly any way to apply these words to David's experience.

4. The Christ was to be mocked.

"All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 'He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!'" (vv. 7-8). This prediction, made a thousand years earlier, was fulfilled in amazing detail as described in Matthew 27:39-43. As Jesus affects salvation through His death, He is scorned and ridiculed even in His agony.

5. He would be stared at.

"I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me" (v. 17). The death of Jesus was predicted to be, and was, a spectacle. Naked or nearly so, His body



stretched out unnaturally, blood, sweat, flies, groaning, it was a scene that riveted the eyes of all who were there, and we need to mentally stare back, remembering what our salvation cost.

6. The Messiah's garments would be divided and lots cast for them. "They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots" (v. 18). It is quite difficult to see how David could have been speaking of His experience. Again, there is quite a contrast between the tender love Jesus expresses from the cross and the hardness of the soldiers, more or less gambling for the only thing of value they see in Jesus.

The psalmist's own response in a time of suffering, when God seems to be absent, is typical of Jesus' experience the day of His torture and death. It begins with an expression of feeling forsaken, then turns to recall God's previous deliverances of His people and then evolves into a plea for God's help. Finally, there is a promise of future praise of God's deliverance.

The psalm foretells Jesus' loss of human dignity due to ridicule. It speaks of the physical effects of fear, terror, and anxiety. And, it describes a deteriorating body, including the impact upon the heart, bones, hands, and feet. A totally broken man, physically, is depicted.

Three Complimentary Psalms

It has been suggested that Psalm 22 is the first of three complimentary psalms that describe the work and offices of our Lord.



The tombs of the kings was believed to have been at this site in Jerusalem before the Romans turned it into a quarry.

- Psalm 22 The suffering Savior (cross)
- Psalm 23 The living Shepherd (crook)
- Psalm 24 The exalted Sovereign (crown)

Psalm 110: Jesus Is Both King and Priest

This psalm begins, "The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool." David is believed to have written this psalm, and he speaks of Jehovah (LORD) speaking to his (David's) Lord. David, at the time, was king. So, to whom would Jehovah be speaking, who was higher in authority than the king? It had to be the messianic future king.

The New Testament record makes this conclusion obvious in several ways.

- As an angel announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, he says the one to be born is to be a "Savior" and "Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).
- Jesus Himself referenced this part of Scripture in a dialogue with the Pharisees about the nature and person of the Mes-

siah. The Pharisees had said the Messiah was to be the "son of David," likely focusing only upon the ancestral blood line. Jesus then asks them, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying: 'The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool?' If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?" (Matt. 22:41-46). Jesus sought to show them from the psalm that the Messiah would also be God's son, deity.

- The apostles also used this psalm to teach about Jesus in their preaching. In Acts 2:34-36, Peter used it to establish the lordship of the Messiah who had been slain for the sins of the world. He said, "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.' Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

This One Was King and Priest

Another obviously messianic indicator in this psalm is seen in the fact that the one portrayed was not only Lord and king, but also a "priest." None of Israel's kings ever legally combined these offices, though some made failed attempts. God's promise to David (2 Sam. 7:12-16) necessarily kept the kingship within the tribe of Judah and the priesthood was linked by covenant with the tribe of Levi.

The only model or precursor for this combination of offices was

Melchizedek, who lived in Abraham's time, before the covenant with Israel (Gen. 14:18-24; Heb. 6:20-8:6).

This could be no ordinary human king. God was inviting this person to sit at His own side. The New Testament teaches it was Jesus who so sat (Acts 2:33, 7:56; Heb. 1:3).

Human, Levitical priests could serve only a few years. The priest in view here is to serve "forever." Again, only Jesus fulfills the picture.

Work of the Messiah Foretold

Sitting at the right hand of God, ruling and reigning, as well as acting as mediator-priest, can speak of no one else but Jesus, after His resurrection and ascension to the Father. These roles continue "till I make your enemies your footstool."

This is spoken of further in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

Psalm 16: Confidence beyond the Grave

This psalm of David expresses the king's total trust in God, not only for the present, but for the unforeseen future. He speaks of God as the foundation of His inheritance, calls upon the Lord to preserve Him.

In particular, the psalmist says, "My flesh also will rest in hope." The underlying reason given for that hope is then declared. He writes, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will you allow Your Holy One to see corruption."

Just what did the writer mean?

In Acts 2:25ff, David's words are applied to Jesus. David's "hope" was not immediately made reality, because he died and the audience in Jerusalem knew where David's tomb and remains were located. However, Peter explains that fulfillment came via David's offspring—the Christ. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus was what David spoke of and what, therefore, is the basis of David's hope and confidence in God.

Peter goes on to preach remission of sins available in Jesus' name. The apostle Paul later would elaborate at length on the connection between Jesus' resurrection, salvation from sin, and every believer's hope for his own future resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. List six things prophesied about Jesus on the cross, found in Psalms 22. _____

2. What can we learn about how to react to suffering from Psalm 22? _____

3. Do you think Psalm 22 is about:
 David's suffering Explain your answer in class. _____
 Jesus' suffering _____
 Both _____
4. Give at least two reasons why you believe Psalm 110 had to be speaking of Jesus. _____

5. Explain how the existence of David's tomb and remains meant the fulfillment of Psalm 16 had to be explained in Jesus. _____

Lesson 10

The Imprecatory Psalms

One facet of the psalms that has troubled some Christian readers is the fairly common practice of psalm writers calling upon God to curse, punish, or utterly destroy their enemies or the wicked. This type of psalm often is called “imprecatory,” that word derived from “imprecate,” which means “to invoke evil upon, curse.”

Here are some examples of the sort of language that has shocked Christian sensibilities and raised questions in the minds of some about the inspiration and validity of some of the psalms.

Investigate

Review these psalms and see if you can determine the context of the pleas for God to render judgment:

35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140

How do you initially feel when you read such calls for such terrible disasters upon one's enemies?

Does it seem righteous, from the point of view of a Christian?

About eighteen of the psalms have some element of imprecation in them, but of the 368 verses that compose these psalms, only 65 verses carry such pleas for divine action.

It is worth observing that these calls for terrible judgment by God never name an individual. They were always against a class of people, leaving open the possibility that if an individual in such a class repented, he could be forgiven and exempted. Also, these classes of people typically were the enemies of God's kingdom, not just personal enemies.

Are They Attributable to a Lower Standard of Morality under the Old Testament?

Some folks, struggling to make these pleas for catastrophes make sense in light of the New Testament, suggest that we must understand them as coming at a time when the moral standard was lower. The suggestion is that the Old Testament's moral standard demanded much less than the covenant of Christ.

Without totally throwing that suggestion aside, it must be observed that the Law of Moses commanded the people of Israel to love their enemies (Lev. 18:19), and the wisdom literature taught them to feed a hungry enemy (Prov. 25:21-22).

Psalm 55:15

*Let death seize them;
Let them go down alive into hell,
For wickedness is in their dwellings
and among them.*

Psalm 58: 6-8

*Break their teeth in their mouth, O
God!
Break out the fangs of the young
lions, O LORD!*

*Let them flow away as waters which
run continually;
When he bends his bow,
Let his arrows be as if cut in pieces.*

*Let them be like a snail which melts
away as it goes,
Like a stillborn child of a woman,
that they may not see the sun.*

Psalm 109:9-13

*Let his children be fatherless,
And his wife a widow.*

*Let his children continually be
vagabonds, and beg;
Let them seek their bread also from
their desolate places.*

*Let the creditor seize all that he
has,
And let strangers plunder his labor.
Let there be none to extend mercy
to him,
Nor let there be any to favor his
fatherless children.*

*Let his posterity be cut off,
And in the generation following let
their name be blotted out.*

Issue: Do These Calls for Divine Response Conflict with New Testament Teaching?

Many Christians initially are troubled by the so-called imprecatory psalms because they recall clearly the teaching of Jesus, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44; cf. Luke 6:27, 35).

The Role of Anger

Research what the Bible says about anger. Use an exhaustive concordance.

1. Who is most often described as being angry in the Bible?
2. Are Christians told never to be angry?
3. Can a righteous person not be angry about sin and its impact on friends, family?
4. What is complacency? Is it sinful?

Jesus, dying a torturous death on the cross, appealed to the Father to “forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). The apostle Peter taught that it is commendable before God to endure grief and suffer wrongfully, that it is in fact the imitation of Jesus Himself (1 Pet. 2:18-24).

Some have sought to ameliorate the presumed difficulty in the psalms by suggesting that the moral standard of the Old Testament age was different, less developed than the morality of Christ and the New Testament, but this is a tenuous argument at best; at worst, just wrong. Notice that personal revenge was forbidden and loving treatment of enemies commanded under the old law just as it is under the new (Lev. 19:17-18; Prov. 24:17; 25:21-22).

A careful analysis and study of Scripture will demonstrate that these psalms are not expressing anything antithetical to God’s standards of righteousness under either covenant, but in fact reflect the type of judgment God has promised through both the ancient prophets and the writers of the New Testament age.

The language is poetic and thus emotionally charged, utilizing vig-

orous or even exaggerated language to express depth of feeling. And, yet, as we shall see, some of that same language was divinely inspired in the voices and pens of the prophets.

He would do (cf. 35:5 to 1:4). They express abhorrence of certain forms of evil, appeal for God’s form of justice, and understand the inseparable connection between sin and punishment.

3. Many of these psalms appear to be uttered by King David. A review of David’s life will illustrate that he was patient and forgiving when personally insulted or harmed. However, when David speaks as king, he speaks as head of the executive and judicial branches of Israel’s government. It was his job to see that justice was done. Also, as God’s “anointed” shepherd-king, actions against him were very often actions against God and God’s will. The psalmists are, in some cases, taking up God’s cause (5:10-11; 21:10-11; 139:19-22). Notice that they speak of the wicked working against God.

4. Punishment of evil-doers is a practice of virtually all nations and peoples. That is one of the primary roles of government. Read Romans 13.

5. Some of the imprecatory psalms are prayers for success in battle, for the destruction of enemies. Don’t we pray for our troops’

Explanations of the Imprecations

1. Observe in the psalms under consideration that the people being cursed are not enemies with regard to trivial matters. They are wicked. They hate the righteous people of God, mock God, and suppress the godly (5:4-6, 9-10; 10:15; 42:3; 94:2-7).

2. It is a mistake to view these imprecatory expressions as pleas for personal vengeance. Rather, they are the voice of moral outrage and indignation, rooted in a knowledge of God’s standards of righteousness and His condemnation of sin. These psalms are prayers for God to vindicate His ways (10:17-18). They are pleas that God do what He has said



success in battle? How can they be successful unless the enemy is killed or otherwise defeated? (See Psalm 144:1-7 as example.)

6. Some of the petitions in the psalms actually use language that demonstrates they are appeals for God to do what He declared prophetically that He would do.

Compare the Psalm with Isaiah 13:16
“Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered And their wives ravished.”

Psalm 137:8-9

*O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,
Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!
Happy the one who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock!*

Read Jeremiah 50 and 51 in regard to the manner of judgment God had planned for Babylon.

New Testament Expresses Similar Ideas

Bible students have an incomplete view of New Testament teaching if they view the language of the psalmists as totally inconsistent with Christian faith. The passion

for justice reflected in the psalms is certainly not contrary to the gospel. Modern one-sided gospels may disallow such teaching, but not the true gospel. The apostle Paul clearly taught “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. The Old Testament taught “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exod. 21:24). The New Testament teaches that a man shall reap as he sows (Gal. 6:7-9). Is there a difference? _____

2. Make some notes for a prayer you might address to God if your wife was raped by a gang or one of your children was molested or murdered. Try to express to God your feelings, expectations of Him, etc. _____

3. How do you understand the purpose of imprecatory psalms? _____

The group of psalms known as laments is rooted in an individual or nation's crisis or great distress. And these laments usually entail a plea for God to help. Human experiences such as suffering, pain, despair, and hopelessness often are dramatically expressed in this genre.

Two Main Lament Types

Personal Laments: 3, 5, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42, 51, 55, 57, 59, 77, 88, 123, 140, 141, 142, 143

Community Laments: 44, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 137

The laments are, numerically, the most common form in the psalms, nearly a third of the psalms being of this type. And, even in psalms where the main theme is not lament, there may be elements of such present.

The majority of the laments are individual in nature, focused upon one person's experience and crisis, rather than that of the larger community. There are, however, about seventeen laments that speak on behalf of the community or congregation or nation.

The setting of each lament will have to be discerned. In some cases, such as Psalm 102, the superscription helps. It reads, "A Prayer of the afflicted when he is overwhelmed and pours out his complaint before the LORD." The crises can be varied, sometimes spiritual, but at other times material, physical, or mental or a combination.

Sometimes the exact nature of the crisis is difficult to ascertain, because the language is so general. At other times there is a more specific reference. For example, in Psalm 137, Judah's military defeat at the hands of Babylon is in view. The psalmist cries out for vindication. Crop destruction and social corruption are other themes.

Psalms of Lament

Typical Structure of a Lament Psalm

The lament psalms have a fairly standard structure that involves four elements. Psalm 13 is used here as an example of each element. This form doesn't appear in every lament psalm, but it is fairly common.

1. Invocation (introductory address to God)

Verse 1: How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?

2. Complaint or Lament (the crisis or situation prompting the lament)

Verse 2: How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

3. Petition or Supplication (the plea for help)

Verses 3-4: Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death; Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him"; Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.

4. Conclusion involving motivation or vow (usually positive, expressing confidence in God)

Verses 5-6: But I have trusted in Your mercy; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, Because He has dealt bountifully with me.

It is worth noting that many of these psalms show a change in mood near the conclusion, where sorrowful expressions and pleadings are followed by confident assurance that God has heard and will answer the prayer. This pattern may be seen also in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, where He pleads for escape from the cross, but then changes tone dramatically and accedes to whatever may be the Father's will (Matt. 26:39).

The Nature of the Complaints in These Psalms

Usually the nature of the complaint in the laments takes one or more of three variations.

1. Complaints against God, perceiving Him to be the problem.
2. Complaints against an enemy, thus an external problem.
3. Complaints against the psalmist himself, thus an internal problem.

It is not often that all three forms of complaint are found in a single psalm, but that is the case in **Psalm 22**.

1. The complaint against God—vv. 1-2

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, And from the words of My groaning? O My God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not hear; And in the night season, and am not silent.

2. The complaint against his enemies—vv. 7-8 and 12-13

All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”

Many bulls have surrounded Me; Strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me. They gape at Me with their mouths, Like a raging and roaring lion.

3. The complaint against himself—v. 6

But I am a worm, and no man; A reproach of men, and despised by the people.

Comparing Crises to Being in Sheol

Some crises appear so great that the psalmist compares his distress to what he imagines existence in Sheol to be like. Sheol is the world of the dead, the underworld, the realm of death.

Before the New Testament concept of “hell” was developed, the ancient Israelites nevertheless had a concept of an existence in a region sometimes called “shades” or “the pit” where there was no hope of escape. It was a place of terror, where one was gripped by the power of death. Yet, often the psalmist is not claiming to actually be in Sheol, but he is expressing the depth of his misery as being likened to being there.

Psalm 88 is a good illustration of this use of death or Sheol in a lament. Some of the language will remind readers of some of the language Job spoke in his anguish and of Jonah’s description of his condition when swallowed by the great fish.

Other Categories of Laments

Besides dividing the lament psalms into individual and community psalms, other categories also can be observed.

1. Prayers of Sick Persons. Psalms 38 and 41 are examples. There often is an intertwining of physical illness and spiritual anguish, an early evidence of what psychologists have only recently discovered.



2. Petitions by Those Falsely Accused (Prayers of Innocence).

Psalm 7, particularly verses 3-5, serves as an example.

O LORD my God, if I have done this: If there is iniquity in my hands,

If I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me, Or have plundered my enemy without cause,

Let the enemy pursue me and overtake me; Yes, let him trample my life to the earth, And lay my honor in the dust. Selah

3. Pleas for Asylum in God’s Temple as a Sanctuary.

Psalm 61:2-4 illustrates.

From the end of the earth I will cry to You, When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For You have been a shelter for me, A strong tower from the enemy.

I will abide in Your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of Your wings. Selah

4. Prayers of the Oppressed or Persecuted. Psalms 3, 4, 5 and 7 are exemplars of this type, but there are many more.

5. General Laments. Some psalms, like Psalm 22, seem either general or very inclusive of several manners of distress.

Laments Help Us See Part of the Purpose of Prayer

Sometimes prayer can be a perplexing concept. God knows our needs before and better than we do. He knows what is best for us, even when we don’t. So, in one sense, we don’t need to instruct God, via prayer, about our needs or list for Him how He should come to our aid. What then, is the purpose and value of prayer?

The prayer psalms help us see that the aim of prayer is to convince God to act on our behalf now, rather than waiting until a later time. The vehement expressions of pain, the protests that justice demands actions, the implication that unrighteousness is about to get the upper hand, all imply that God can be convinced or provoked to act on our behalf.

And, there is biblical support for the idea that God’s mind, as it were, can be changed. Abraham negotiated with God for the preservation of Lot and his family (Gen. 18:20-32). Moses became an intercessor for Israel on more than one occasion when God expressed His intent to destroy people. God listened to Moses and preserved Israel.

The psalms of pain and protest can sometimes shock Christians, who are not used to the idea of talking

to God in such a way. We may feel as the psalmists, but we also deem it inappropriate to speak so to God. Yet, it was Jesus Himself who appropriated language from Psalms 22 on the cross as He laments His feelings of separation from God, identifying Himself with humankind's often similar feelings (Mark 15:34).

Perhaps we hold back too much from God as we pray. We may be, unintentionally, creating a false image of our true feelings as we come before the throne of grace. There is a great need for total honesty in prayer. Just as in a human father-son relationship, there needs to be respect shown. But, the father also needs to know what his son truly believes and feels. These psalms show us we need not fear boldly speaking to God.

Resolution of human problems often requires our solicitation of God's forgiveness. But, forgiveness by God requires acknowledgement or confession of our sins. The very process of constructing a song of lament may help identify the true cause of our suffering and impel us toward confession. Psalm 32 reflects this need.

Psalm 74: A Community or National Lament

Read this psalm carefully. It would appear that the Babylonian destruction of the temple in 586 BC is in view. This was a national disaster.

- The lament opens with a question. Why?
- That is followed by a call for God to “remember” His people, as before.

- There is then a description of what the heathen are doing to God's temple.
- God's absence is observed; no prophets, no way of knowing how long this situation would continue.
- That God's name is being blasphemed is noted, just before the plea for aid.
- God is called upon to quit holding back and use His hand to destroy the enemy.
- God's historic power is recounted back to the creation.
- Finally, the people identify themselves with God and plead that He not forget His covenant, ignore their plight, or fail to uphold His cause, and they tell God the tumult of opposition to Him grows daily.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. From a Christian perspective, what do you make of expressions of great lament to God as seen in the psalms? Should a Christian lament in such a way? _____

2. Think about the most recent or greatest crisis you have faced. Jot down some notes about how you felt. Now, using the four elements of a conventional lament, write a short psalm of your own to express your feelings and needs to God. (If you feel this is too personal, you don't have to share it with the class.) _____

3. What do you see as the most fundamental feeling in the psalmists' heart when he says, as in Psalm 88, that he feels as though he is in the realm of the dead or the pit? And how is his feeling similar to what the reality of hell will be? _____

4. Think over the various challenges or distresses that you or others have experienced and list at least one where your complaint is against:
 God: _____
 An enemy: _____
 Yourself: _____

Psalm 119: The Word of God from A to Z

Psalm 119 is by far the longest of all the psalms with 176 verses and 315 lines. Yet, it certainly is not so difficult to understand. Its dominant theme is the importance of God's word. While elements of it may, at first, appear repetitious and perhaps haphazard in form, a closer look demonstrates a careful design. It gives its readers a kaleidoscopic or mosaic view of the many-sided qualities of Scripture. The seeming simplicity of the psalm belies the depth of its teachings.

The psalm is wholly occupied with praising God's revelations as the only true source of spiritual strength and comfort, and includes prayers for the grace to make profitable use of what God gives. In this sense, it is an extensive elaboration of the theme which opens the book—Psalm 1:1-2. The subject is viewed in the psalm in many different lights, and addressed in a variety of ways.

Various observers have pointed out that only one to three of the verses lack some reference to God's word. The 19th century commentator Franz Delitzsch has written, "Here we have set forth in inexhaustible fullness what the word of God is to a man and how a man is to behave himself in relation to it."

It is important to draw from the psalm that God's word is not seen

as valuable merely from the view of having a theoretical or scholarly knowledge of it. The psalmist emphasizes throughout how the law or teaching of God must be sought, learned, and obeyed so that a man can find happiness, peace, and well-being. Thus, the psalm provides an extended meditation on "walking" according to the Law of the Lord. The tone for this is set in verse one and can be seen also in verses 47, 77, 97, and 174 which speak of the writer's "delight" in that word. To the psalmist, God's instructions are not viewed as harsh edicts, but as a source of joy.

The law became to the psalmist a representative of God Himself. He ascribes to the law many of the attributes of God. This is but one important lesson, one further emphasized in the New Testament when Jesus is described as "the Word" (John 1:1).

Trying to capture the essence of the psalm, men have variously entitled it "Meditating on the Lord's Instruction from A to Z," or "Delight in God's Decrees," or "The Alphabet of Divine Love" or "The Golden Alphabet."

The psalm uses at least eight different Hebrew words as virtual synonyms for God's instructive and declarative

communications to man.

It also has been suggested that the psalm appears to have been written for people who view their life in this world as a sojourn, a journey through territory not their homeland. Thus, as aliens or foreigners, they need God's word to direct their way.

Remembering that psalms are designed to express feelings as well as facts, it is worth noting that Psalm 119 is probably the greatest expression of love for God's law to be found in the Old Testament. It is through this law that man establishes fellowship with God.

God is mentioned in some fashion in every verse. It contains, by one calculation, seventy prayer requests. The psalmist refers to himself 325 times and mentions his suffering in sixty-six verses.

Authorship and Date of Writing Unknown

There is no information in the psalm that definitively identifies who was its human author. It has no title, superscription, or directions for its use. Suggestions of possible writers have included David, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and Daniel. Some have

Scripture Synonyms

- Law—25x
- Word—24x
- Rulings or ordinances—23x
- Testimonies—23x
- Commandments—22x
- Decrees or statutes—21x
- Precepts or charges—21x
- Sayings, promises—19x



suggested that it was written after the Babylonian captivity, assuming it reflects an increased devotion to the revealed word of God springing from the exile experience, but there is nothing in the text necessitating such a conclusion.

A comment by Charles Spurgeon is thought-provoking. He said, “There is an evident growth in subject matter (*in the 119th psalm—rb*). The earlier verses are of such a character as to lend themselves to the hypothesis that the author was a young man, while many of the later passages could only have suggested themselves to age and wisdom. In every portion, however, it is the fruit of deep experience, careful observation, and earnest meditation.”

Written in a Complete Acrostic Style

For English readers, the fact that this psalm was written in an *alphabetic* or *acrostic* form is largely irrelevant to our use of the psalm. In Hebrew poetry the acrostic doesn’t spell out words. Rather, the initial lines or stanzas begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with succeeding lines or stanzas beginning with succeeding letters of the alphabet.

In English, a simple example might be as follows, using only the first three letters:

*Almighty is our
God
Atheists shall quake
before Him
All men shall bow
before Him
Beautiful is the
name of our Lord*

*Beneficial to man is His word
Become, therefore, a follower of
God*

*Come to speak tributes to the Lord
Cry aloud your praises
Carry forth His word to the ends of
the earth*

One writer has described this form as “curiously arranged as a sort of index” and another has suggested the psalm takes more the form of a crossword puzzle than a poem. And, this special Hebrew acrostic form may seem artificial to us, but consider that an ancient Jew reading our use of rhyme might reach the same conclusion about our poetic devices.

What Is the Purpose of the Acrostic Form?

We don’t know for certain why this form was used. It has been speculated that it served to:

- Aid memorization
- Serve as a structural hint that the message is comprehensive, covering the topic from “A to Z”.

It is important to realize that the acrostic form is not unique to psalm 119. Most serious Bible students are

familiar with Proverbs 31:10-31, which focuses on the greatness of a “virtuous woman.” Those 22 verses each begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with *aleph* and ending with *taw*. (Observe that Hebrew has twenty-two letters, compared to the twenty-six in English.) Lamentations also makes use of this form.

Eight other psalms use the acrostic format, but are more irregular (9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145). Psalm 119 is a bit different and more elaborate than the others, in that it uses the alphabetic format, using eight lines beginning with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Some Bibles, including the New International Version, have subheadings between the sections, using the English spelling of each Hebrew letter (*aleph, beth, gimel, dalet*, etc.).

Overview of the Psalm

The following notes are a sort of cryptic “Cliff Notes” style overview of each stanza of Psalm 119. Observe that each octuple can stand alone as a deep and expansive thought requiring considerable meditation, or can be linked to others that evolve the thoughts in new directions.

Notice again that Psalm 119 appears to be a massive development of the briefer message of Psalm 1, which begins and sets the tone for the entire book.

א – Aleph (vv. 1-8). Here is expressed the blessedness of the one who walks in, keeps, and seeks the law, ways, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments,

and judgments of the Lord.

ב – Beth (vv. 9-16). Answered here is the question that confronts the

young. How can one with limited learning and little experience properly direct his/her life? It is accomplished by heeding, meditating upon, and embracing in heart the word of the Lord.

ג – Gimel (vv. 17-24). Possible insight into the psalmist is given here. He is a stranger or sojourner who is the object of sinful scheming and scorn by others. He speaks of lament over his condition but also of faithfulness to and delight in the testimonies and statues of God.

ד – Daleth (vv. 25-32). God’s “way” is dominant here. The psalmist pleads that God keep him from the wrong way and show him the right way. He asserts his trust in God’s way.

ה – He (vv. 33-40). Here the thought moves from God’s way to the psalmist’s need to “walk” in that way. He pleads with God to teach him, to give him understanding, to incline his heart, turn his eyes from wrong, revive him, and establish him through revelation.

ו – Waw (vv. 41-48). The psalmist expresses his personal commitment to the words and ordinances of the Lord, and solicits the Lord’s mercies and salvation as a result.

ז – Zayin (vv. 49-56). He finds comfort, hope, and joy in God’s word, even as he is assailed by the wicked, who forsake the Law of the Lord.

ח – Heth (vv. 57-64). He now illustrates how he has been protected

by his obedience to God’s law, commandments, precepts, and judgments.

ט – Teth (vv. 65-72). The word “good” is prominent here. He asks God to teach him good judgment and knowledge. God is good and His law “better” than money. Even the affliction the psalmist suffered when he went astray is declared good, because it disciplined him.



י – Yodh (vv. 73-80). The focus is upon learning God’s will, leading to a “delight” in His commandments. He expresses confidence that the One who made him will guide him rightly.

כ – Kaph (vv. 81-88). Life can be difficult and full of suffering, yet the psalmist declares he will not use that as an excuse to reject God’s word. Quite the opposite, he will trust in God’s word for salvation.

ל – Lamedh (vv. 89-96). I am Yours, save me! Again, the emphasis is on the overwhelming troubles facing the psalmist and his unwavering trust in God to save him. God created all things and His faithfulness will endure through all generations.

מ – Mem (vv. 97-104). The psalmist expresses his “love” of God’s law, declares he “meditates” upon it all the day, and that it makes him wiser than his enemies and the aged. He says God’s words are “sweeter than honey.”

נ – Nun (vv. 105-112). Psalm 119 pictures life as a journey. Here, that journey is depicted as being in the dark, and God’s word is pictured as a lamp, giving his path light.

ס – Samekh (vv. 113-120). God’s word is powerful when viewed singularly as the only source of truth. The psalmist contrasts his singular love of God’s law to the “double-minded” who only partially embrace God’s law. Jesus also said, “You cannot serve two masters.”

ע – Ayin (vv. 121-128). Declaring himself to be God’s “servant,” the psalmist pleads that God act quickly to save him from his enemies, who have regarded God’s law as void.

פ – Pe (vv. 129-136). Siding with God, the psalmist speaks of God’s teachings as being wonderful, enlightening, giving understanding to the naïve. He longs for, pants for those teachings to direct his steps and keep iniquity from having dominion over him.

צ – Tsadhe (vv. 137-144). The righteousness and purity of God’s ways are contrasted with the smallness and weakness of the psalmist. Yet, this is all the more a reason to embrace God’s truth.

ק – Qoph (vv. 145-152). He repeatedly asserts his commitment to keeping the law of the Lord, even as he cries out for God to hear, save, help, and revive. The point: Only those who keep the word of the Lord have reason to expect God to “hear” them.

ר – Resh (vv. 153-160). He continues his cry for rescue from his enemies. He

seeks God as a redeemer, to plead his cause. He bases his plea for help on his trust in and love of God’s word, which is wholly true and endures forever.

ש – Sin/Shin (vv. 161-168). Just as Jesus offered His disciples peace, even as He foretold of great persecution, so the psalmist here focuses on the peace he enjoys even in the midst of trials.

ת – Tav (vv. 169-176). Once again expressing ultimate confidence in God’s word, a commitment to continually praise and teach it, the psalmist also humbly depicts himself like a sheep gone astray, who needs God’s word to draw him back to the right path.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Using the acrostic or alphabetic format, create a shortened ABC poem that teaches something about God’s word. We’ll title the poem “The ABCs of God’s Word.”

A _____
A _____
B _____
B _____
C _____
C _____

2. List five ways in which God’s word is valuable to you. _____

3. Describe how life is like a journey on a pathway. Also demonstrate how God’s word is critical in making that journey successfully. _____

4. How is God’s word like a lamp? What description of Jesus is made in the New Testament that links Him to this concept? _____

5. What role does God’s word have in establishing and maintaining fellowship with Him? _____

6. What purpose or sense is there in loving, delighting in, and keeping God’s law if, by so doing, our lives are made difficult by those who reject, ignore, or disobey that law? _____

Using the Psalms to Improve Our Praying

Many Christians are embarrassed or ashamed to admit they don't know how to pray well. Preachers tell us prayer is simply "talking to God." Yet, all sorts of big and little questions persist about the manner and mode of prayer, attitudes required, and what we ought to expect.

Sometimes we imagine that there are things we think or feel that we can't bring to God. Are some of our concerns off limits? A study of the psalms may help answer these questions.

Jesus' disciples realized they needed help learning to pray. They were not shy and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray as John the Baptist had taught his disciples (Luke 11:1). So, Jesus gave them a "model" prayer (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Obviously, proper prayer isn't instinctive. Since it can be taught, it seems prudent to use a resource like the psalms to assist us.

One writer has suggested that "the psalms make it possible to say things that are otherwise unsayable." Like Jesus' model prayer, the psalms teach us *how* to pray by showing us examples.

Many a preacher, preparing for a sermon, has found a thought phrased by another writer that

seems superior to any words he has thought of to express the idea. Therefore, the preacher either quotes or adapts with some modification the superior phraseology. The psalms are a fantastic sourcebook for expressing some of our deepest thoughts. Can any saint be faulted for quoting or paraphrasing

Like Jesus' model prayer, the psalms teach us how to pray by showing us examples.

Scripture in talking with God? One writer has observed that the psalms provide "a repertoire of human sentiments and experiences with which we can match our own." In other words, we appropriate the language and thought of Scripture (a psalm) to our own circumstances.

We certainly have divinely recorded precedent for quoting psalms in prayer. Jonah did so (Jon. 2). And, even more importantly, Jesus endured the cross, quoting from psalms in His final prayer before He died (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34;

Luke 23:46). The early disciples did so as well (Acts 4:24-26).

Using Jesus' Model Prayer and the Psalms

As recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus taught several important principles in regard to prayer, including:

1. How to address God. The pattern Jesus taught was, "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name."

- Psalm 8:1 offers an alternative, "O Lord, Our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth." Psalm 25 begins, "To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in You."
- David's great plea for mercy begins, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to the multitude of Your tender mercies" (Psa. 51:1). Also, observe how the following psalms begin their address: 28, 54, 61, 63, 67, 75, 86, 88, 90, 102, 141, 143

2. Pray that God's will be done. Jesus' wording was, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

- Compare Psalm 57:11—"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; Let Your glory be above all the earth."

3. Ask for assistance with our physical needs. The Lord's model focused on but one of those needs, saying, "Give us this day our daily bread."

- Psalm 144:12-15 illustrate this further with requests for healthy children, full barns, fertile livestock, and safe streets.

4. Request help with our spiritual needs. Again, Jesus just gave one example of such, saying, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And, do not

lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

- David’s penitent plea in Psalm 51 illustrates such spiritual needs and requests about as well as any passage in Scripture.

5. How to conclude a prayer.

Jesus’ prayer concluded, “For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

- Jesus ends His model prayer with praise and Psalm 36:5-9 is but one of many illustrations of similar praise in the psalms.

Another Set of Prayer Patterns

The book of Psalms presents a beautiful pattern for prayer, which will assist the godly in better addressing God and receiving the fullest blessings from the habit of prayer. Here is that pattern:

1. Reviewing the past.

Looking back at our problems, failures, sins, and triumphs. Such review helps us, first of all, to appreciate that God has always been faithful.

- ### **2. Reflecting on God.**
- From such a review one should move to reflection on God’s character, expanding our understanding of who He is and what fellowship with Him entails.

3. Recalling God’s promises.

By renewing in our minds the promises God has made, we find our faith enlivened and strengthened.

- ### **4. Asking God to act.**
- Then, based on God’s character, re-

cord, and promises, we are positioned to ask Him, in a proper manner, to act on our behalf.

Expanding the Subject Matter of Our Prayers

A careful overview of the prayer psalms can serve to show us a much broader scope of subjects for prayer. If we limit our prayers to thanks for our food, homes, family, and salvation; to requests to help the sick and spiritually ailing; and to personal petitions in times of cri-



sis or when caught in sin, we may be robbing ourselves and shorting God at the same time.

The psalms showcase language that praises God for His righteous ways, thus elevating and impressing such a standard of good on our own minds. When was the last time that you, like the psalmists, asked God for wisdom? Or for courage?

Here are some psalms that help us express ourselves when in certain circumstances:

- When afraid—3, 91
- When alone—27
- When envious of others—73
- When sad—13

- When weak—40, 121, 142
- When worried—37
- When tempted—141
- When you feel like praising God—96, 100, 145

Special Prayers in the Psalms

1. A prayer for dependence—Psalm 86
2. Prayer expressing a longing for God—Psalm 63
3. Expression of trust in God—Psalm 62
4. Prayer of distress—Psalm 57
5. Declaration of gratitude to God—Psalm 65
6. A prayer expressing grief—Psalm 102
7. Special prayer when God seems to be silent—Psalm 44
8. Expression of joy to God—Psalm 66
9. A prayer of desperation—Psalm 142
10. A prayer of despair—Psalm 88
11. A Cry to God for help—Psalm 3
12. A Prayer of penitence—Psalm 51
13. Seeking God in the midst of fear—Psalm 23
14. Prayer in the face of doubt—Psalm 73
15. When facing death—Psalm 90
16. Expressing our praise of God—Psalm 150

Expanding Our Vision of God

The psalms can serve to help us see God in new lights. Not only is He our Father in heaven, He is our shield, deliverer, teacher, refuge, healer, judge, rock, and best listener. The psalms speak of all these and more.

Drawing closer to God requires not only imitation of Him in obedience but growing in awareness of



His divine character, work, and interactions with us.

Being Honest When We Pray

Many of the psalms speaking to God are shocking to 21st century Christian readers, for they express deep feelings that seem to us to border on blasphemy. It is tempting to express to God only the feelings we think are appropriate to share with the Almighty, but doing so vastly limits both the scope and results of praying.

We've already looked at the imprecatory psalms, where saints called upon God to judge their enemies, to cut off evil and evil-doers. We certainly are taught to love our enemies (as were Old Testament saints), but like the martyred saints under the altar, there remains a place for us to cry for God's vindication and righteous judgment on all evil (Rev. 6:9-10).

We need to express our true thoughts and feelings to God in prayer, not merely words that we imagine He will find acceptable.

As you read the prayer psalms, notice some of the subjects addressed that we seldom think of praying about.

Improving the Language of Prayer

Let us be cautious here. We are not suggesting a need to impress men with our ability to use special, decorative, or cosmetic language in prayer. But, when a man is leading prayer in a public assembly there is great value in being able to express with power and intensity both the thoughts of those he is leading and, perhaps, thoughts they need to be led to think and pray.

The psalms are poetry, as we've observed before. Believe it or not, the language of poetry is not about speaking in flowery language, but about speaking in condensed, pithy, and powerful words that intensely focus the mind on the subject at hand.

Thus, there is much for the public prayer leader to learn from the psalms as he seeks to focus a congregation in praise, petition, and thanksgiving.

We regularly copy prayer phrases we hear others speak. Why not phrases and words from a divinely inspired book of prayer?

Secondary Value of Prayer

The primary efficacy of prayer is found in the fact that God "an-

swers" our prayers, often intervening, lifting up, removing difficulties or otherwise seeing to our best interests.

But, many Christians have observed another value in talking with God. Like a talk with a parent or friend, the *process* often allows us to work our way through a problem, to discover answers or change attitudes.

A number of the psalms seem to illustrate this process, beginning with cries of agony, despair, frustration, or fear. But, as the psalm progresses, the psalmist reflects on truths about God. He speaks aloud of how God has helped in times past. He adds together the sum of his discoveries or remembrances and then speaks in confidence that God will again aid him. And, he often concludes with praise for God.

Through this process, the immediate challenge or dilemma may not have been changed at that moment, but the one praying has been aided, his spirit calmed, his hope restored, his peace recaptured.

Psalms 22 will serve as our primary example, though there are many others. It is this psalm that Jesus drew attention to as He hung on the cross, quoting the first line, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus' use of the first line is intended to draw attention to the entire psalm, then He is likely identifying Himself and His feelings with the whole psalm as well.

Notice that the prayer of Psalm 22 begins with an emotional outburst expressing the feeling of abandonment by God and fear that God is not listening. However, the psalm quickly turns to recollection of God's holiness, His past faithfulness and deliverance of Israel.

The psalmist then returns to the cause of his prayer, which is his terrible plight as men mistreat him. The original psalm well describes Jesus' plight on the cross, and the psalm turns from expression of his

condition to a plea for God's help. Then, perhaps surprisingly at first, the psalmist declares, "You have answered me." The psalm ends with a call to praise God.

The praying psalmist progresses from an outburst of fear and agony to an outburst of praise. And, notice the steps in that progress. There is a major lesson about prayer in this.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Do you consider anything off limits when it comes to prayer? _____
What about feelings of hatred or great aggravation that you feel for someone? _____
What about feelings of doubt you might have about some statement in Scripture? _____

2. How do you address God when you pray? _____
Do you address Him the same every time? _____
Why is this address important, in your view? _____
3. Jesus taught against "vain repetition" in prayer, pointing us toward credible communication with God and not a mere rote repetition of someone else's words again and again. However, Jesus also provided a model prayer for His disciples. With that in mind, what can you find of a useful nature in the prayers of inspired Scripture?

4. Find one or more psalms that incorporate the following elements:
A reviewing of past problems, failures, sins, and triumphs. _____
Reflection on God's character. _____
Recalling God's promises. _____
Asking God to act. _____
5. After observing the progression of thought in Psalm 22, from a feeling of abandonment to praise of God for all His aid, do you ever see such a progression in your own personal prayers? If so, to what do you attribute this?

6. What have you learned about prayer in your study of the psalms? Be prepared to share with the class. _____

Lesson 14

The Hallelujah or Praise Psalms

The “hallelujah” or praise psalms comprise a significant portion of the Book of Psalms. The word “hymn” especially speaks of a song of praise. Such psalms or hymns seek to declare God’s goodness and mercy and declare His power, majesty, and mercy.

Hallelujah

This word means “praise the Lord” and is comprised of two parts:

Hallelu = praise

Jah = shortened form of Jehovah or Yahweh (God)

Alleluia = Greek equivalent?

This being a major component of worship, these psalms can be most useful in accomplishing Christian worship today.

Praise or adoration or celebration is the concept behind this portion of the psalms. The psalmists, and we through imitation, acclaim, extol, commend, and applaud God, His attributes, and works. Thus, at least a portion of the Psalms can be viewed as a hymnal or songbook. The New Testament instructs us to speak to one another “in *psalms*, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Similarly, we are instructed in Colossians 3:16

that we are to teach and admonish one another “in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” And, James 5:13 says, in part, “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing *psalms*.”

Sigmund Mowinckel has written, “The core of the hymn of praise is the consciousness of the poet and congregation that they are standing face to face with the Lord Himself, meeting the Almighty, holy and merciful God in His own place, and worshipping Him with praise and adoration . . . to express what the congregation is seeing and feeling, and to increase His glory in the world.”

There are five different Hebrew words which are all translated *praise* in our Bibles. Each demonstrates a different taste, style or flavor of praise. But, each finds in common an intense enthusiasm and energy. There is nothing reserved, reticent, or ambiguous about the Hebrew praise psalms. This is an important lesson to 21st century Christians.

The five words mentioned above are:

1. Hallel. This word occurs 99 times in the Old Testament,

33 of those in the Psalms. It means to “celebrate, to laud, to boast.” It is the root of the word *hallelujah*.

2. Yadah. This word means to worship with extended hands, raised arms.

3. Barak. Means to declare God as the origin of power, success, or victory and recognizes Him as the source of all things

4. Shabach. This is to shout or commend *loudly*. Notice again the lack of reserve. One does not have to “lose control” to express praise unreservedly.

5. Gil. This term means to circle in joy, to dance in circles. We have no New Testament instruction to dance, but Israel did have such.

Place of Praise Hymns in the Book of Psalms

We previously have studied the “lament” psalms. It is important to see the relationship between those and the praise psalms we now explore. C. Hassell Bullock observes, “The emotional disposition of the Psalter alternates between praise and lament, but the nature of the Psalter is such that the power of gravitation is in the direction of praise.”

As we observed in the lament psalms, the lament is directed toward God and elicits hope for God’s help, which in turn draws from the

Modern Praise Hymns

- “Hallelujah, praise Jehovah”
- “Hallelujah, what a Savior”
- “Praise Him, Praise Him”
- “Praise the Lord”
- “Alleluia”
- “How great Thou art”
- “Lift up your voice in praise”
- “Jesus, name above all names”



human heart praise of the One who can alleviate, empower, and cause us to overcome. Someone has suggested that sighing is turned into singing through prayer.

We observed in Lesson Two that the book of Psalms appears to be divided into five books. When looking at the relationship between the psalms of lament or complaint and the psalms of praise, we observe that the former outnumber the latter in the first three books of psalms, and the latter outnumbers the former in the last two books. It would seem that praise is the goal toward which the whole book moves. Doxologies of praise conclude each of the five books, with the great hymn of praise (150) calling for “everything that has breath (to) praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!”

Importance of Praising God

The importance of praising God cannot be over emphasized. In fact, it is arguable that the very purpose for human existence is the praise of God. The apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). This recalls the words of Solomon, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear (*respect*, rb) God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Eccl. 12:13).

That praise of God is more important than sacrifice is expressed in Psalm 69:30-31:

*I will praise the name of God with a song,
And will magnify Him with thanksgiving.*

*This also shall please the LORD
better than an ox or bull,
Which has horns and hooves.*

Praise, by its very nature, elevates another person, focuses away from self and directs the attention of others to the one being praised. Praise often is conjunctive, calling upon others to join in the praise.

Praise of God seeks to increase the sense of His power and renown in the minds of human beings. It is not that God needs a slap on the back or an ego boost, but that we need to see Him as He is and as our ultimate source of strength. Through praise He becomes our ultimate standard, model, and hope. Praise likewise produces such a vision of God in others. The primary mood of such praise is joy, enthusiasm, and adoration.

Human beings almost spontaneously praise whatever they value or care about. We are compelled to praise something and almost invariably do. And, it is arguable that praise is not only an expression of joy but completes the enjoyment.

Nothing and no one deserves such praise more than God.

The Content of Praise Is Important

Much is done today that is called “praise music” or “praise worship,” but lacks any serious content. It may be comprised largely of shouting, dance-like swaying, and verbalization of the words “praise the Lord” or “hallelujah.” Often these calls to praise are without much context or substantive content.

Such was not the case with the praise psalms of the Old Testament. Praising the Lord was more than the mere summons to praise or the expression of intent to praise, which often do introduce a praise hymn, but the call or statement of intent was followed by the actual praise. And, that praise concretely identified the reasons for which God ought to be praised, and the enunciation of those reasons became the praise itself.

So, even today, it is fine to call upon others to “praise the Lord,” but realize that the call is not the praise. The praise comes as we extol the characteristics and action of God that call for praise. Thus, praise is not simply an emotional expression (though it should entail emotion), but also is instructive.

Two Major Categories of Praise Psalms

Two basic types of praise psalms are found in Psalms. One type might be described as “declarative praise” and the other as “descriptive praise.” The first involves generic language like “Praise the Lord” without as much detail of why or what the psalmist is praising. Descriptive praise, on the other hand, details the cause for praise. Some psalms begin with the more generic approach and transition to greater detail.

Write a Praise Hymn

Using the 3-step pattern here described, write a praise hymn that extols God for something He has done for you.

General Form of the Praise Psalms

Generally speaking, the praise psalms follow a form with distinct elements.

1. **An exhortation or call to praise or worship.** The exhortation may seek to include others, such as “O come, let us sing” or it may be more personal, as in “I will praise the Lord” or some similar expression. Where others are exhorted, they may be named, such as the Lord’s servants, Jacob (or Zion’s) sons, the faithful, the righteous or “they that fear the Lord.” In these exhortations, God’s name is always mentioned, often with grand appellations. The exhortation may begin with an *exclamation*, such as “O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth” (Psa. 8:1) or with a *statement* (Pss. 76:2; 48:2; 46:2).

2. **Main body of the hymn.** The body of the hymn often begins with words like “for” or “because” and then lists reasons, usually in a series of short sentences, why He should be praised. These reasons usually entail a great deed God has done (especially His acts in history) or some quality of His divine character. Repetition for emphasis is common.
3. **Conclusion.** The conclusion often is virtually identical to the exhortation, usually calling for and stating the praise of God.

Major Themes in Psalms of Praise

The things for which God can be praised are innumerable, yet a review of the psalms shows that some themes are often repeated. They include:

1. Praise of God as Creator—Psalms 8, 19a, 33, 104, and 136
2. Praise of God as King—Psalms 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99
3. Praise of God during harvest—Psalms 65 and 145
4. Praise of God looking to His action in history—Psalms 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136
5. Praise of God as He is approached in worship—Psalms 24, 95, and 100

The Hallelujah Psalms

There are ten psalms in this group. They are 106, 111, 112, 113, 135, and 146-150. Each of these psalms begins with the expression “hallelujah” or “praise the Lord.” And, all but two of them end with the same expression.

Read **Psalm 106** and make a list of:

- a. **The things God did worthy of praise** _____

- b. **Laudable characteristics of God:** _____

Read **Psalm 111** and then list at least six things for which God is praised. _____

Read **Psalm 148** and explain what you think the psalmist is trying to say. _____

Other Praise Psalms

Not all the praise psalms begin with the unique nature of those mentioned above, but they nevertheless are focused on praising God. They include Psalms 8, 29, 33, 36, 117, and 136.

Read **Psalm 8**. What do you see as the focus of the psalmist’s praise? _____

Now, read, Hebrews 2:5-9, where a portion of this psalm is quoted.

What is contrasted in **Psalm 36** that brings forth praise of God? _____

Psalm 117 is the shortest of all the psalms and is a call for Gentiles to praise God.

Psalm 136 is a praise psalm that accomplishes its purpose by a repetition of what statement? _____

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Using a dictionary if needed, write a definition of “worship.” _____

Now, explain how each of the five acts of Christian worship fulfill this definition.

Prayer: _____

Giving: _____

Preaching/reading the word: _____

Singing: _____

Communion: _____

Do you believe our worship today adequately expresses the joy of salvation, hope of heaven, and adequate thanksgiving and praise to the source of all spiritual blessings? _____

Be ready to explain your answer in class. _____

2. How do we “praise” God? Is it sufficient to simply sing “Praise Him, Praise Him!” or is more required? _____

3. Explain any connection you see between our laments or complaints and praise of God. _____

4. Who benefits, in your estimation, from the praising of God? _____

5. What is the point of the word *hallelujah* or the phrase *praise the Lord*? (check one or more)

- It is a word or phrase that praises God
- It is a call for others to begin the action of praising God
- Both
- Other

6. For what do you think God deserves the greatest praise? _____

Why? _____

7. For what reasons do we usually praise other fellow human beings? _____

Are these the same or different from the reasons we praise God? _____

Lesson 15

The Psalms of Thanksgiving

Next to obedience, perhaps the most significant response a man can make to God is that of gratitude and thanksgiving. In many ways the theme of thankfulness pervades the whole book of Psalms. But, several are specially focused on this human emotion.

We have studied the “lament” psalms, where individuals and the nation of Israel made fervent pleas to God for assistance, deliverance, or salvation in times of physical or spiritual crisis. In a number of the lament psalms there is a vow or promise made at the end to praise and thank God if He will deliver (7:17; 13:5; 26:12; 35:28). Thus, the thanksgiving psalms can be fulfillment of such vows.

Emotionally, the thanksgiving psalms are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the laments, the latter expressing fear, desperation, and inability to help oneself, the former joy, appreciation, and renewed trust in the One who came to the rescue. Thus, one commentator has described the psalm of lament and the psalm of thanksgiving as complementing one another like the “two shells of a mussel.”

The difference between the two types is that in the psalm of lament the crisis is *in progress*, while in the psalm of thanksgiving it is *past*, though still acutely remembered.

The thanksgiving psalm also can be described as “the final act in a human drama” where the heart has arrived. That heart has moved from complaint to trust and finally to thanksgiving.

In expressing gratitude to God, the psalms, psalmists, and we today emphasize a realization of something unique about God; that He is good and merciful and loving.

It might also be worth the time to parse the difference between gratitude and thanksgiving, the former being an attitude of heart and the latter the outward, verbal expression of that attitude.

During the Mosaical period, prayers and songs of thanksgiving were accompanied on many occasions by “thank offerings” given to God to express gratitude. Some

Thank Offerings
See Leviticus 7:11ff and 22:29ff

of the lament psalms promise such offerings (27:6; 54:6-7).

Thanksgiving Psalms May not Be a Separate Category

Some students of the psalms have argued that the songs that bespeak gratitude are merely a part of the praise hymns. And, it is observable that most, if not all, of the psalms that express thanks, also praise. At least one scholar argues that the Hebrew language lacks an explicit word for “thank” and that the verb *hoda*, which often has been translated “to thank,” rather means “to praise.” Other scholars argue for translating the Hebrew as “thanks” as well as “praise.”

Whatever the case, we have chosen to look at a selection of psalms which express gratitude.

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.”

—Cicero
Roman philosopher

Importance of Thanksgiving

Gratitude is an important spiritual virtue. It is a central element of worship, for without it, one focuses only on self and not upon God. Further, out of the expression of gratitude grows love for and respect for God. And, from that love emanates obedience, trust, and faith.

Happiness and contentment come from a thankful heart, that appreciates God’s blessings and dealings with us. The opposite attitude engenders murmuring and complaining about how God has dealt with us. Such brings only misery and death, as is illustrated in Israel’s first generation wilderness experience.

For all these reasons, God has repeatedly commanded active giving of thanks.

Prayer and singing are the two most common vehicles for thanksgiving, and the psalms of Israel were used for both. Thanksgiving often is paralleled with the voicing of praise, which we've previously seen to be an integral element of the psalms.

Form of Typical Thanksgiving Psalms

While there are variations, the typical thanksgiving psalm is structured as follows:

1. Introduction: A call to worship, or blessing; stated intention to thank God
2. A restatement or narrative of an individual or national lament (trouble)
3. An account of God's salvation or deliverance
4. Conclusion: Praise of God and/or a further call to worship

It should be noted, however, that there is a large amount of variation in the structure of individual psalms. Sometimes the introduction is absent and at other times another element may be missing.

Two Basic Types of Thanksgiving Psalms

Generally speaking, the thanksgiving psalms can be divided into two categories:

1. Individual psalms of thanksgiving
2. Community or national psalms of thanksgiving

The Nature of These Psalms

Somewhat different from a simple hymn of praise, the thanksgiving psalms usually focus upon



a particular benefit or blessing or answer to prayer bestowed on an individual or the whole congregation.

These psalms follow somewhat the pattern of the earlier victory songs, such as the Song of Moses (Gen. 15:1-8) and the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5).

These psalms seek to give honor and praise to God for some definite benefit, while simultaneously thanking Him. And, they also seek to declare His honor before others, imploring them to likewise praise the Lord.

Looking at the Individual Psalms of Thanks

It is difficult to accurately subdivide and classify the psalms into exact categories. Many have elements of more than one genre and may be variously categorized by different students. However, several psalms seem to fit the model of an individual thanksgiving psalm.

Psalm 107 is a unique thanksgiving psalm. The central portion (vv. 4-32) consists of four sections, each telling of a group who were in distress.

- vv. 4-9: Desert travelers suffering hunger and thirst
- vv. 10-16: Prisoners

- vv. 17-22: People who were sick
- vv. 23-32: Seafarers in a storm

Each group in turn "cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered (saved, or brings) them out of their distresses" (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28) and then each group is encouraged "Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). The final verses of the psalm are a hymn extolling the providence of God in the lives of men.

Psalm 18 (David's deliverance from King Saul)

This psalm is attributed to David and the superscription suggests it was written or delivered on the occasion of David's deliverance from his enemies and King Saul. He speaks of being confronted by death but being dramatically delivered by Jehovah. David attributes this deliverance to his own trust in and righteousness before God. It is full of praise of the power and attributes of the Lord.

Psalm 31 (deliverance from enemies)

The psalmist here repeatedly calls God his rock of refuge, his fortress, his strength, his God. He declares that God has delivered

him from the net laid for him by his enemies, those who persecute, lie about, and speak insolently and contemptuously of him. He summarizes by saying, “Nevertheless You heard the voice of my supplications when I cried out to You.”

Psalm 32 (deliverance from his own sins)

Here the cause of thanksgiving is not deliverance from an external enemy, but gratitude for God’s forgiveness. This psalm of David expresses the blessedness and great gift found in being forgiven. He expresses the physical and emotional turbulence that sin caused, until he determined to confess his sin to the Lord. Taking the lesson he learned and becoming didactic, the psalmist declares, “But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him.”

Psalm 66

This psalm links what God has done for the nation of Israel with what He has done for the individual who read or spoke the psalm. Historical references to God’s mighty works are combined with references to “what He has done for my soul.” Additionally, there is reference to not only the thanksgiving of praise (of the lips), but of the burnt offerings of a thank offering (vv. 13-15).

Psalm 92

This psalm begins with an expression of the great value in thanksgiving to God. The Lord is generally praised for His greatness and then the psalmist speaks specifically of how the Lord has exalted him, anointed him, and caused him to flourish. He then draws the conclusion that such will be the case for all who will be righteous before God.

Psalm 118

Similar to other psalms of this type, this one speaks of how God

answered his prayer in the time of distress. It uses a repetition to make the key point: “For His mercy endures forever.”

See also Psalms 30, 40, 116, and 120.

Sing Psalm 118

Looking at the Community or Congregational Psalms of Thanks

The individual psalms of thanks appear to be the larger portion of this genre of psalms. However, there are a number which appear to bespeak the thanks of a whole community or the congregation of Israel. This is one of the more nebulous of psalm categories, since it is a fine line to distinguish between hymns of praise and communal psalms of thanks.

As in the individual psalms of thanks, we see (1) the report of the crisis, and (2) acknowledgement that the crisis has passed.

What distinguishes these from the individual category is some reference to a larger group or community, often observed in the use of plural pronouns or a national reference, as in 124:1, “If it had not been the Lord who was on *our* side, Let *Israel* now say. . . .”

In a couple of psalms there is a combining of individual and collective thanksgiving. For example, Psalm 66:1-12 appears to be a community reflection, while 66:13-20 seems to speak from an individual’s perspective.

Psalm 65

God is thanked for atonement made for “our transgressions” and the praise of God is to be delivered “in Zion” (v. 1). Reference is made to God’s house, His holy temple.

Psalm 66

National Israel’s redemption is in view here, as is obvious from historical reminders of what God had done. It speaks of God’s testing and refining of the nation. As a result, the psalmist speaks of going to “Your house with burnt offerings.”

See also Psalms 107, 118, 124, and 129.



Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Drawing upon your memory, choose a time of crisis in your life in which you pleaded for God's assistance and He answered. Using this event, construct your own psalm.

a. _____

Speak of your intention to thank God for His answer

b. _____

Write of the details of the crisis briefly

c. _____

Tell of how God answered your prayer

d. _____

Encourage others to trust in God for help, as you did

2. What is thanksgiving (define it)? _____

3. What is the difference between gratitude and thanksgiving? _____

4. Is thanksgiving an integral part of worship? Explain. _____

5. Who do you believe benefits from the giving of thanks? Explain. _____

6. What difference do you see between "praise" and "thanks"? _____

7. What is the link between psalms of lament and psalms of thanks? _____

Lesson 16

The Penitential Psalms or Songs of the Sinner

Generally speaking, seven psalms are identified as “penitential” psalms, though an even larger number have a predominantly penitential character. The seven most often cited are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. However, Psalms 51 and 130 are the most clearly prayers of penitence (repentance).

These may be viewed as a subcategory of the psalms of lament, which we already have studied. It is difficult to totally separate physical illness, spiritual anguish, and sin. Yet, in this lesson, we will look at psalms where the writer clearly understands sin to be his major issue and the cause of his suffering.

The complaints in other laments most often are against enemies or, occasionally, against God. The laments in the penitential psalms are focused on the writer’s own transgressions. The majority of laments involve claims of *innocence*, but these, significantly, admit *guilt*. They also generally include a petition for God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Often entailed in these psalms is a confession of sins. Yet, it is not confession alone that is deemed important, but confession accompanied by divine mercy and forgiveness resulting in healing and wholeness.

Value to Today’s Reader

Observable in the penitential psalms is the great difference

between biblical model and modern therapies for misbehavior and its consequences.

The psalms we are studying clearly show the need for full, honest admission of one’s own misdeeds, coming from a heart convicted and now repentant. They show that such a response, when met by the grace and mercy of God can result in forgiveness and the lifting of the burden of sin.

Modern psychological therapy is more prone to disassociate the responsibility for misbehavior from the sufferer and to attempt to relieve guilt by denial, transference of responsibility, or some other technique.

Psalms 51, a psalm of David after the prophet Nathan confronted him concerning his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, is a powerful example of what repentance entails. It also demonstrates how to verbalize repentance, in contrast to modern *mea culpas*, which often entail equivocations and ambivalences such as “if I have

sinned” or “if I have done anything to hurt another.”

God’s way is the only truly therapeutic means to spiritual and physical recovery and health.

Psalm 51: David’s Psalm of Penitence

This psalm, perhaps the most soul-searching of all the penitential psalms, is very instructive concerning the nature of true repentance. Notice in the first four verses how completely David admits his failures and sins, describing them as transgressions (going beyond God’s law), iniquities (evil), and sin (missing the mark). He acknowledges or admits his sin and reports how that recognition weighs upon him all the time.

David also sees sin for what it truly is—an offense against God. Thus, it is only God who can “wash him” clean and forgive him of the offense.

This psalm also shows us that repentance entails both sorrow over the transgression and a commit-



A sixth century mosaic depicting King David preserved from a synagogue in Gaza.

ment to going a different direction in the future, with God's help. Thus, repentance is both a turning away from sin and a turning toward God.

In verses 5-6 the psalmist is not asserting he was born genetically infected with "original sin," but that he is part of and influenced by a world filled with sin. This is not excuse-making, but recognition of the depth and seriousness of the sin problem in human existence. And David realizes God's truth in the heart of man, in contrast to the usual sinful heart.

If this psalm teaches us about repentance, it also instructs us about the nature of forgiveness. In verses 7-14 the psalmist cries out for God to:

- "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean."
- "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."
- "Hide Your face from my sins."
- "Blot out all my iniquities."
- "Do not cast me away from Your presence."
- "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed."

Thus, we see forgiveness seeks a washing or cleansing away of what has dirtied or defiled one's life (sin). It also is seeking God's approval or having Him say, "It'll be OK now." Forgiveness entails a wiping of the slate clean, an expunging of our sin record.

And, as verses 10-12, in particular, show, forgiveness yearns for a new start, a second chance. Regret about the past is by its nature a desire for change in the future. Thus, David asks God to:

- "Create in me a new heart."
- "Renew a steadfast spirit within me."
- "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation."

A part of repentance perhaps often overlooked is highlighted in this psalm as well. David speaks of looking forward to giving public testimony and account of God's righteousness in forgiving him. And he offers his future obedience as well as another evidence of his gratitude.

Psalm 32: David's Expression of Joy in Forgiveness

This psalm qualifies as one of penitence, but it also bears the marks of a thanksgiving song. We

Sing "Redeemed"

Notice how the emotions of this song parallel those expressed in Psalm 32.

Sing "Soul, a Savior Thou Art Needing"

Here, the need for a Savior is poetically expressed in song.

select it for attention because of its contrast with Psalm 51, which describes David's feelings and condition *before* forgiveness is bestowed. Here, we hear David describe his condition *after* being forgiven.

If we learn a great deal about penitence from Psalm 51, we shall likewise learn much about the nature of forgiveness from this song.

The importance of confessing one's sins stands out, as the psalmist describes how he felt prior to doing so and the gladness or joy he felt when he made his confession and was forgiven. Guilt is here seen as a powerful, debilitating influence that isn't assuaged by denial. It can literally make a person physically sick, as well as (obviously) spiritually ill.

The concepts of the psalm are principles in the New Testament also, as in 1 John 1:8-9, "If we say that we

have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Psalm 130: Awaiting the Lord's Redemption

Here, again, the psalmist is in deep distress because of his sins. He cries out to God, who alone can address and solve his problem. As David did in the psalms previously studied, this song writer describes his condition in sin as overwhelming, as though he were drowning in the depths of the sea (read Jon. 2). But, from this condition of fear, he rises to hope, because of God's willingness to forgive.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

1. The psalmist's plea—vv. 1-2
2. Assertion that forgiveness is a gift of God—vv. 3-4
3. Description of how the psalmist "waits" on the Lord for redemption—vv. 5-6
4. Declaration that Israel's hope of mercy and redemption is in the Lord—vv. 7-8

The concept of "waiting" upon the Lord is common in Scripture and particularly in the Psalms. It is not so much the idea of letting time pass until the Lord responds as it is expectation, seeing that God is the only source of the remedy sought.

National or Congregational Psalms of Penitence

Most of the laments of penitence in the psalms appear to be from the point of view of an individual, such as David. However, there are at least portions of psalms that depict national penitence and prayer for forgiveness.

A portion of Psalm 79 illustrates such.

Oh, do not remember former iniquities against us! Let Your tender mercies come speedily to meet us, for we have been brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; and deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, for Your name's sake! Why should the nations say, "where

is their God?" Let there be known among the nations in our sight the avenging of the blood of Your servants which has been shed (8-10).

Other Expressions of Penitence

Some of the psalms that can be described as penitential psalms do not so much bear words of confession, remorse, or repentance as reflecting symbolic actions that

bespeak penitence. These actions are designed to make the individual out to be small, insignificant, or miserable (as in describing oneself as being like a worm, etc.). Such a humbling act comes in advance of a plea for God's mercy.

Most Bible students are familiar with the Jewish custom of donning sackcloth and ashes in times of mourning.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. List some things you learned about penitence (feeling of pain, sorrow, and guilt over sin) from your study of Psalm 51. _____

2. How would you explain the fact that David declares his sins (including adultery and murder) to be against God, as opposed to against Uriah or other humans injured by his actions? What do you learn about sin from this? _____

3. What is required, according to Psalm 51, for a restoration of the man who sins? _____

4. Make two lists. In the first, list how David said his sins made him feel (Psa. 32). _____

In the second, describe how a serious sin you committed made you feel. _____

5. Looking at Psalm 130, what phrase demonstrates how awful man's condition would be if God were only a God of justice and not also a God of mercy? _____

6. Write your own four-line psalm, describing your feelings before and after your salvation, or before and after forgiveness of a particular sin. _____

The defining element of those psalms called “the royal psalms” is the subject of kingship. They refer to the “king” or the “anointed” or specifically to David as king. In two psalms (101 and 110), none of these designations are used and yet they clearly describe the power and activity of the king.

In Israel, the king was the representative of the people. In many ways, the challenges he faced were the challenges of the nation.

Sigmund Mowinkel suggests, “These psalms are not a special ‘kind’ or ‘type’ from the point of view of the history of style or literature or liturgy. They comprise nearly all kinds of psalms, both hymns of praise and lamentations, thanksgivings and prophetic sayings, and several other types. Common to them is the circumstance that the king is in the foreground. He is the one who prays or the one who is spoken of, or who is prayed for.”

Israel’s kings had a special and unique relationship with God. They were chosen, “anointed,” or placed in power by God. But, they also were representatives of the nation or people to God. Thus, in obvious ways, they prefigured the role of Jesus as “mediator” between God and men. And, Jesus was to be the perfect or ideal king of God’s people.

“If the book of Psalms takes any one institution and holds it up as the ideal paradigm of the future, it is kingship. In fact, the messianic interpretation of the Psalms . . . found its center of gravity in the psalms that deal with Israel’s kings,” says C. Hassell Bullock.

It is difficult for Americans to fully understand the ancient view of kings. The power and blessings bestowed upon the king by God flow forth in benefit to the nation.

The psalms most commonly identified as royal psalms are Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 28, 45, 47, 61, 63, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, and 144. Many others are so identified by some writers and scholars.

Two Kings in View

It is important to perceive the relationship between the earthly king in Israel and the Lord Himself, who is enthroned in heaven (Psalm 2:4), yet has installed the earthly king upon his throne in Jerusalem (Psa. 2:6).

Kings in Psalms

God as King—Psalm 47

A human king—Psalm 45

Jesus foreseen in both these images

The rulers in these psalms are variously described as “the king” or “Jehovah’s king” or “Jehovah’s anointed” or “Jehovah’s servant.” His residence is “Zion.” Many of the royal psalms appear to have been sung at festivals. Some, of a more private nature, seem to be intercessions on behalf of Israel’s king.

God Depicted as the Power behind the Throne

God Himself is Israel’s ultimate king. During the days of Samuel,

The Royal Psalms

Israel rejected the concept of having only a heavenly king and asked for an earthly one, like the nations about them (1 Sam. 8). God granted the request, yet designates the request as at least a partial rejection of Him as king of the nation.

But, even in approving appointment of an earthly king, God’s pattern was far different from that of the nations surrounding Israel. First, God selected the king, as the examples of Saul and David illustrate. He put them upon the throne as His representative, as Psalm 2:6 illustrates: “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion.”

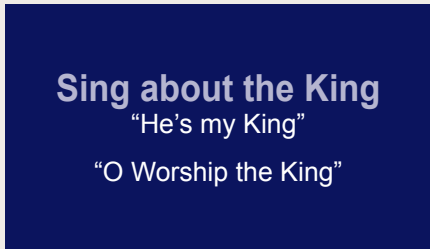
God established a Father-son relationship with the king (Psa. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14). This reveals many things about how God’s king would be different from other earthly monarchs, as well as pointing to the ultimate king—Jesus, the Messiah.

These psalms often speak of the king’s military accomplishments, but don’t envision him as the cause of the victories. Rather, God is the power behind various conquests. Psalm 18 exemplifies this well.

Royal Psalms Depict an Era of Justice and Righteousness

God’s intent always was to have His nation ruled in justice and righteousness. Some of the royal psalms express this. God’s own

throne is founded on justice (89:14) and thus the Lord anticipated that the monarch whom He would set upon the earthly throne would rule in like manner, with a “scepter of righteousness” (45:6). It was the role of kings, as is divinely ordained government today, to defend those being mistreated and to help the needy and punish evildoers (72:4, 12-14).



The Royal Psalms and the Messiah

The royal psalms are a large anchor for the Messianic hope. The very term “messiah” means “anointed one,” which was another term for Israel’s kings. While the psalms picture the ideal role of a king, biblical history declares the disappointments and failures of purely human monarchs, foretold in 1 Samuel 8. Yet, in the frail model is set the hope of a future king that God would appoint, who would achieve the ideal.

Psalm 2: Reign and Victory of God’s King

A messianic psalm, this is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament (Acts 4:24-27, 13:33; Heb. 1:5, 5:5; Rev. 1:5, 2:27, 12:5). David is the author (Acts 4:27).

The psalm is divided into four strophes with an equal number of points of view:

1. The psalmist’s question: Why do nations resist God and His anointed—vv. 1-3
2. God’s reaction: Laughter, derision, wrath, while putting His king in Zion—vv. 4-6

3. Response of the Messiah: God had decreed Him His son, given Him the nations of earth as an inheritance and power over His enemies—vv. 7-9
4. Call to nations: Kings and rulers should fear and love the Son (king)—vv. 10-12

Psalm 18: King David Gives Thanks to His Rock

The text of this psalm is nearly identical to 2 Samuel 22. The most famous king of Israel describes God variously as his strength, rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, salvation, stronghold, and Lord.

The title indicates it was written by David when God delivered him from his enemies, and particularly from the hand of King Saul. The psalm speaks of God delivering him from a “strong enemy” (v. 17); from a “flood of ungodliness” and death (v. 4).

The poem may be outlined simply as follows:

1. An introduction or prologue filled with praise—vv. 1-3
2. The main body of the poem in narrative recounting God’s goodness—vv. 4-45
3. The conclusion or epilogue, which is largely filled with thanksgiving—vv. 46-50

Psalm 45: The Wedding of the King

This psalm begins with praise of the king and then speaks of his bride. On its surface it seems to be speaking merely of a king’s wedding. Yet, the language seems to speak of something deeper, and thus probably Messianic in its nature. This is made all the more likely by the quotation of 45:6-7 in Hebrews 1:8-9, speaking of Jesus and His kingdom.

Whether a historical wedding of a king in Israel is the original picture or not may be open for debate. However, the ideal depicted seems to only have been fully realized in the union of Christ and His bride, the church.

The poem has two main divisions:

1. An address to the bridegroom—vv. 2-9
2. An address to the bride—vv. 10-15

The first verse serves to introduce and the last two verses to conclude.

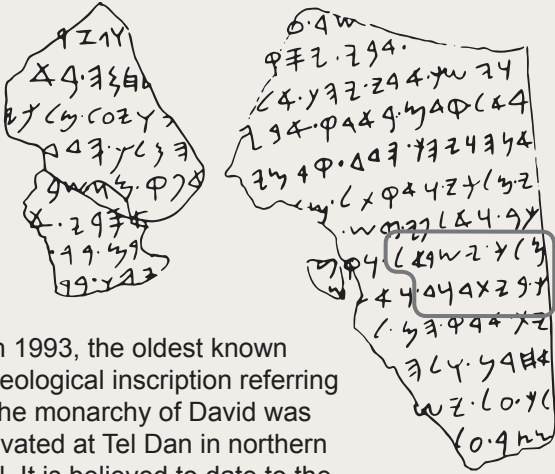
Psalm 47: The Divine King

Historically, God was Israel’s divine king before there was an earthly monarchy in Israel (Exod. 15:18). Jehovah is the “king of kings.” And, it is worth noting that God remained Israel’s king after the earthly monarchy ended with the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities.

But notice, especially, that God is not being praised merely as the king of Israel, but as king over all the earth. He is the king and God of Israel, but much more.

Daniel refers, with some accommodation, to Nebuchadnezzar as “king of kings” in Daniel 2:37. In a very limited sense, he was. He ruled over many other nations and their kings. His rule was a microcosm of a greater one that God would set up. Even this Babylonian king seemed to realize there was yet a greater king. Later in the same chapter, he told Daniel, “Truly, your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings . . .” (2:47).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as “King of kings” and the Lord of lords” (17:14; 19:16).



In 1993, the oldest known archaeological inscription referring to the monarchy of David was excavated at Tel Dan in northern Israel. It is believed to date to the ninth century BC.



“King of Israel”
“House of David”

Psalm 72: Plea for a King of Justice

The title of this psalm attributes it to Solomon. While it well may reflect a prayer for Israel’s ancient king to help bring righteousness and peace to the nation, it also looks forward to the ultimate achievement of those goals in the reign of the Messiah.

The poem opens with a plea that God give the king His judgments. This parallels Solomon’s request to God at the beginning of his reign for wisdom. Famously, the granting of such wisdom is seen in the account of Solomon’s judgment with the two women arguing over a baby.

Yet, whatever the achievement of righteous rule in Israel, it pales in comparison to the rule of Christ, the king of peace. The righteous rule is to be marked by fair treatment of the poor and needy. As a result, the

king will be exalted above all other rulers.

Psalm 110: Sit at My Right Hand

The title says this is a psalm of David. Remember that this can mean it is written *by* David, *about* David, or *for* David. Even a casual reading finds problems with the idea that this is exclusively describing David.

We are greatly assisted in knowing the long-range implications of the psalm by Jesus’ own reference to it in His dialogue with the Pharisees, recorded in Matthew 22:43-45 (also Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). There, Jesus asks how David could call one of his offspring “Lord.” In doing so, he points back to Psalm 110:1.

Reference also is made in the psalm to King Melchizedek, a contemporary of Abraham, who

is described as a priest “forever.” Hebrews 5 quotes this part of Psalm 110 and applies it to Jesus.

Thus, like Melchizedek, Jesus combines the offices of king and priest. No Israelite king could do so, since the kingly dynasty was rooted in Judah and the priestly function in Levi.

Peter used this psalm in his Pentecost sermon to identify Jesus as the Messiah of prophecy (Acts 2:34). Paul uses the psalm to look forward to the conquest of all enemies under the Christ (1 Cor. 15:25). See also Hebrews 1:13 and 10:13.

Thus, the psalm is both royal and Messianic.

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Describe your understanding of the authority and responsibility of a king. _____

2. In Psalm 18, David speaks of God in a number of figures or comparisons. Explain what you think David meant by calling God his . . .

Rock: _____

Strength: _____

Fortress: _____

Deliverer: _____

Refuge: _____

Shield: _____

3. In Psalm 18, how does David describe how God responded to his cries for help? _____

4. Look first at Psalm 18:46-50. Now, using more modern language, write a four-line poem that speaks to how God protects and secures your life. _____

5. Reading carefully Psalm 45, list the reasons you believe the psalm to be speaking of either (a) a human king; or (b) Jesus, the Messiah. _____

6. During the time prior to the cross, how did God prove Himself to be king over all the earth, and not merely a local or national “god”? _____

7. What, to you, is the significance of the idea of a “king of kings”? _____

8. From Psalm 72, what linkage do you see between righteousness and peace? _____

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