

An Introduction to the Book of Psalms

Introduction...

- I. One of the most uplifting personal Bible studies in which I have engaged in the last few months has been a study of the Psalms.
 - A. I have found Psalms to be a tremendous source of spiritual consolation and strength. Particularly, the book has helped me in my life long quest for a closer relationship with God.
 - B. Growing out of this study is a resolve that I have made to do more preaching from this inspiring collection of songs.
 - C. What I want to do in this lesson is to share with you some of the overall insight that I have gained.
- II. The book of Psalms is:
 - A. ... the largest book in the Bible
 1. The 150 psalms are divided into 2,461 verses containing 43,743 words
 - B. ... quoted more by the N.T. than any other O.T. book
 1. Of the N.T.'s 283 direct quotations from the O.T., 116 are from the book of Psalms (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey Of The Old Testament*, p. 272)
- III. Early Christians sang the psalms in their worship services...

Eph 5:19 19 speaking to one another in **psalms** and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;

Col 3:16 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with **psalms** and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
- IV. Over the years, this body of sacred literature has been so important to Christians that many of our printed editions of the New Testament also contain the Psalms.
- V. To effectively study the Psalms, we need to begin at the beginning and talk about the collection of Psalms as a whole.

Discussion...

I. The Title - "Psalms"...

- A. The Hebrew title means "book of praises"
 1. This is an appropriate title since about 20 of the collection are pure praise psalms, and portions of many others are given to adoration of God

- B. The Greek title, “Psalms” (Gr. *psalmoi*), was first used as a general title in the Septuagint (LXX) translation.
1. This was the title used by **Jesus**...

Lk 20:42-43 42 "For David himself says in the book of **Psalms**, 'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, "SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,
43 UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.'"
 2. This was the title used by **Peter**...

Ac 1:20 20 "For it is written in the book of **Psalms**, 'LET HIS HOMESTEAD BE MADE DESOLATE, AND LET NO ONE DWELL IN IT'; and, 'LET ANOTHER MAN TAKE HIS OFFICE.'
 3. This was the title used by **Paul**...

Ac 13:33 33 that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second **Psalms**, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.'
- C. Thus, the title has been deemed appropriate from antiquity.

II. The Authorship...

- A. While David is most frequently associated with the book of Psalms, actually, the psalms were written by many different writers
1. **73 psalms are assigned to David** (Psa. 3-9; 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145)
 - a. David is referred to as “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1)
 - b. The prophet Amos reports that David was even the inventor of certain musical instruments (Amos 6:5)
 - c. The Davidic authorship of many psalms is even affirmed by the N.T.
 - (1) Jesus ascribed Psa. 110 to David in Matt. 22:41-46
 - d. Legitimate questions have been raised in recent years concerning the subtitle references to the David authorship.
 - (1) The Hebrew preposition in the superscription, “A Psalm of David,” (Psa 20) can be translated “for,” “belonging to,” “to,” “by,” “of,” or “concerning.”
 - (2) If any of these alternate translations are used, the subtitles would not be advocating Davidic authorship but only a connection of some kind to David.
 - (3) An example is Psa 20. Though the common subtitle ascribes the psalm to David as author, it seems rather to be a prayer prayed on his behalf as he was about to lead his army into battle.
 2. **12 psalms are assigned to Asaph (Psa. 50, 73-83)**
 - a. Asaph, a Levite of the Gershonite family (1 Chron. 6:39-43), was one of David’s three chief musicians who were appointed to sound cymbals of bronze in praise to Jehovah when David brought the ark of God back to Jerusalem (1 Chr. 15:19; 16:5)

- b. He was a “seer” [or prophet] (2 Chr. 29:30), who prophesied under the direction of king David (1 Chr. 25:2)
 - c. The Chronicler confirms that Asaph wrote songs of praise (2 Chr. 29:30)
- 3. **11 psalms are assigned to the sons of Korah** (Psa. 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88)
 - a. The sons of Korah were gatekeepers (1 Chr. 9:17-27) and musicians at the tabernacle and the temple (2 Chr. 20:19)
- 4. **2 psalms are assigned to Solomon** (Psa. 72, 127)
 - a. The historian tells us that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:32)
- 5. **1 psalm is assigned to Moses** (Psa. 90)
 - a. When the Israelites were delivered from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, they sang the song of Moses to celebrate their deliverance (Ex. 15:1-19)
 - b. Near the end of his life, Moses taught the Israelites another song (Dt. 31:30-32:47)
- 6. **1 psalm is assigned to the wise man, Heman** (Psa. 88)
 - a. Heman was a musician and seer, a Levite, the son of Joel and grandson of the prophet Samuel; of the family of the Kohathites (1 Chr. 6:33), appointed by David as one of the leaders of the temple singing (1 Chr. 15:16-17, 19; 16:41-42; 2 Chr. 5:12)
- 7. **1 psalm is assigned to the wise man, Ethan** (Psa. 89)
 - a. This Ethan may have been a Levite of the family of Merari, one of the leaders of the temple singing along with Heman and Asaph (cf. 1 Chr. 15:16-17, 19). This Ethan is probably identical with Jeduthan (1 Chr. 16:41-42; 25:1, 6; 2 Chr. 5:12)
 - b. He may also have been a different man who was known for his wisdom who lived in the time of Solomon (1 Ki. 4:31)
- 8. **50 psalms remain anonymous**
 - a. These are sometimes called the “orphan psalms”
 - b. However, there is reason to believe that some of these were written by David
 - (1) Psa. 2 is ascribed to David by the apostles (Acts 4:25)
 - (2) Psa. 1 seems to be by the same author
 - (3) Some of David’s words in other sections of scripture are very similar, if not identical, to some of the psalms
 - (a) Psa. 105 is similar to 1 Chr. 16:7-22
 - (b) Psa. 96 is similar to 1 Chr. 16:23-36

III. The Superscriptions...

- A. 116 psalms have some kind of title or superscription
- B. These superscriptions include things like...
 - 1. The authorship or subject ??? (e.g. Psa. 24, “A Psalm of David”)
 - 2. The historical background (e.g. Psa. 3, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son”)
 - 3. The character of the psalm, i.e. “a prayer of David” (Psa 17), a contemplation (“Blessedness of Forgiveness and of Trust in God” – Psa 32), etc.
 - 4. Musical directions
 - a. The kind of musical accompaniment (e.g., Psa. 4, “On a stringed instrument”)
 - b. The tune (e.g., Psa. 45, “according to the Shoshannim or ‘Lilies’”)
 - 5. Assignment of the psalm (e.g., Psa. 4:1, “For the choir director”)
 - 6. The intended use of the psalm
 - a. Psa. 92, “A Song for the Sabbath Day”
 - b. Psa 120-134, “A Song of Ascents”
- C. Three positions have been taken with regard to the psalm titles or superscriptions
 - 1. They are secondary additions which are unreliable
 - 2. They are authentic and infallible
 - 3. They are not original but reflect early reliable tradition
- D. The evidence suggests no compelling reason to believe that they are anything other than a part of the original sacred text.

IV. The Dates...

- A. Most of the psalms were written over a period of about 500 years, between 1000 BC and 500 BC
- B. The earliest psalm (Psa. 90) dates from the time of Moses (ca. 1400 BC).
- C. Most of the Psalms were written during the time of David and Solomon (ca. 1000-931 BC)
- D. Psalm 137 was written at the time of the exile ca. 586-536 BC
- E. Psalm 126 was written at the time of the restoration ca. 500 BC

V. The Contents...

- A. The book of psalms is the longest book in the Bible, and in Jewish usage, it was organized into five books (some have thought this pattern was derived from the Pentateuch).
 - 1. Book 1: Psa. 1-41 [41 psalms] – Written mainly by David
 - 2. Book 2: Psa. 42-72 [31 psalms] – Written mainly by David

3. Book 3: Psa. 73-89 [17 psalms] – Written mainly by Asaph
 4. Book 4: Psa. 90-106 [17 psalms] – Written mainly anonymously
 5. Book 5: Psa. 107-150 [44 psalms] – Written partly by David (2/5) and partly anonymously (3/5)
- B. Each of these five books ends with a doxology [a special ascription of praise to God] (cf. Psa. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6)

VI. The Features of Hebrew Poetry...

- A. Most modern poetry is based upon rhyme (parallelism of sound), or rhythm (parallelism of time).
1. In Hebrew poetry, however, there is neither a parallel of rhyme nor of rhythm, but a parallelism of ideas.
 2. This greatly facilitates translation into other languages. No matter what the language, Hebrew poetry never loses its beauty.
- B. Hebrew poetry features at least four different types of parallelism...
1. **Synonymous parallelism**, in which the second line restates the first in different but synonymous terms
 Ps 15:1 “O LORD, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?”
 2. **Antithetic parallelism** is just the opposite: the lines are in contrast to each other.
 Ps 37:9 “For evildoers will be cut off, But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.”
 3. **Synthetic parallelism** in which each successive line expands the meaning, enriching the thought.
 Ps 19:8-9 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.
 4. **Chiasmic parallelism** is found throughout Psalms. Chiasm, or saying things forward and backward, is the arrangement of the elements of a text in the form of a mirror-like reflection.
 - a. Psa 51:1
 - a Have mercy upon me, O God,
 - b According to Your lovingkindness;
 - b According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
 - a Blot out my transgressions.

- C. Like English and other languages, Hebrew poetry also abounds in the **use of literary devices** such as:
1. **Simile:** Comparison of two things, usually employing the words “as” or “like” (Psa. 1:3)
 2. **Metaphor:** Comparison of two things without using the words “as” or “like” (Psa. 84:11)
 3. **Hyperbole:** Exaggeration for effect (Psa. 6:6; 51:5)
 4. **Personification:** Applying personality traits to inanimate objects (Psa. 35:10)
- D. Some psalms possess **Acrostic structure** wherein verses (or sometimes half-verses, or stanzas) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Psa. 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; cf. Pr. 31:10-31)
1. Psa. 119 is the best example. It has 22 sections of 8 verses each. “Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet occurs 8 times in succession as the initial letter of the verses in its section.” (ISBE, 2491)
 2. Most likely, the text was presented in this fashion as a device to aid memorization.

VII. The Types of Psalms...

- A. **Penitential:** Expressions of a penitent heart (cf. Psa. 6; 32; 37; 38; 39; 51; 102; 130; 143)
1. Confession of sin occupies the greater part of each of these psalms
- B. **Didactic:** Psalms that teach or instruct (Psa. 1; 5; 7; 15; 17; 50; 73; 94; 101)
1. These might be called psalms of formal instruction
- C. **Historical:** Psalms that record a resume of Israel’s history (Psa. 68, 78, 89, 105-106, 132, 135, 136). Psalm 78 provides the basic reasons for God’s reminders of Israel’s history
1. That the generation to come might know... Psa. 78:4
 2. That they might set their hope in God... Psa. 78:7
 3. That they may keep His commandments... Psa. 78:7
- D. **Messianic:** Psalms that prophesy of the Messiah (Psa. 2; 8; 16; 22; 40; 45; 68; 69; 72; 78; 89; 102; 109; 110; 118; 132)
1. The psalmists spoke of the Messiah’s: Preexistence; incarnation; life; death; resurrection; ascension and reign; priesthood and intercession
 2. The Messianic Psalms simply told the gospel story in prophesy before it became the gospel in fact. All in the beautiful lyrics and compositions of the ancient singers in Israel.
- E. **Hallelujah:** Psalms of praise (Psa. 106; 111-113; 115-117; 135; 146-150)
1. “Hallelujah” is a transliteration of a Hebrew phrase which means “praise the Lord”
 2. Each of these psalms begins with the expression “Hallelu-Jah” (translated in our English versions as “Praise ye the Lord”)
 3. All but two (Psa. 111-112) also end with the expression “Hallelu-Jah”

4. We may read the hallelujah psalms with more understanding if we know some things to look for
 5. These psalms of praise evince two basic reasons for praising God
 - a. For WHO HE IS (description) cf. Psa. 113:4
 - b. For WHAT HE DOES OR HAS DONE (declaration) cf. Psa. 113:4,7-8,9;114:8;115:15-16
- F. **Supplication:** (Psa. 86)
1. In these psalms, the psalmist cries out to God in his own need, or he intercedes for another's need
- G. **Thanksgiving:** (Psa. 16, 18)
1. The note of praise and thanksgiving pervades the whole book of Psalms, but some individual psalms are particularly thanksgiving psalms
- H. **Nature:** (Psa. 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 104)
1. God's handiwork in creation is highlighted in these poetic masterpieces
- I. **Ascent or Degree:** Psalms sung by the Jews on their pilgrimage up to the temple on the occasions of the national feasts (Psa. 120-134)
- J. **Imprecatory:** Prayers for the defeat and overthrow of the wicked (Psa. 35; 52; 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; 137; 140)
- K. **Acrostic:** (Psa. 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145)
1. The acrostic psalms "are alphabetical psalms; that is, they are organized so that each line or each series of lines begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet." (Thaxter Dickey, "The Acrostic Psalms," *Christianity Magazine*, March/April 1994, p. 81)
 2. Psa. 119 is the best example. It has 22 sections of 8 verses each. "Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet occurs 8 times in succession as the initial letter of the verses in its section."

Conclusion... Why Study This Book?

- I. The simplest reason: Because it is a part of God's inspired message to us
- II. Many of the psalms contain Messianic prophecies about Jesus Christ. They tell us about our Lord.
- III. The Psalms helps us learn to pray.
 - A. The book of Psalms has been accurately described as "Man speaking to God." In most of the Bible God is speaking to man, but the Psalms show man speaking to God.
 - B. Psalms is a veritable storehouse of the most beautiful poetic language and praise anywhere in the literature of the world.
 - C. The Psalms teach us that God hears and answers our prayers... cf. Psa. 6:8-9
- IV. Psalms is a mirror of our soul. Within we can find our own problems experienced and described by the inspired men who wrote the Psalms – and God's response to those men.

- V. The Psalms contain truth and lessons which are timeless and vitaly needed today
- A. The Psalms teach us about God (His greatness, His mercy, His power, His knowledge, His justice, His goodness, His wisdom, etc.)... cf. Psalms 139
 - B. The Psalms teach us about morality (How to live the right way and why)... cf. Psalm 15
 - C. The Psalms teach us the kind of attitude we should have when we realize that we have sinned against God... cf. Psalm 51
 - D. The Psalms teach us the principle that godliness will ultimately be vindicated and ungodliness will inevitably be punished... cf. Psalm 1