

PSALMS PART 1 INTRODUCTION

**“I will extol the LORD at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.
My soul will boast in the LORD;
Let the afflicted hear and rejoice.”**

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him
And in whose spirit is no deceit.”

**“Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and my body with grief.....”**

If we open our Bibles at the middle, we will find ourselves in the Book of Psalms. The whole of the Bible is God’s written word to his people, but this book is different in one significant way. The whole of the Bible proclaims, “Thus says the LORD”, but the Book of Psalms proclaims, “Thus, O LORD, your faithful people respond.” The Book of Psalms represents the Spirit-inspired response of the people of God ... to living in covenant relationship *with* him, through faith *in* him under the authority of his word (or Torah – law).
Indeed, the psalms reflect on what God has said and done throughout the Old Testament and foreshadow the New.

In the psalms we hear the voices of many faithful people of God over a period of around a thousand years: Moses, David, Solomon, Asaph, the sons of Korah and others. Some are by unnamed. These are songs for God’s faithful people to sing in community or alone, during formal worship or informally. They are both specific and timeless. They arose from particular circumstances but are just as relevant for us today.

As we read or sing the psalms, we are joining hands across the centuries with faithful believers who have gone before us. These are the people the psalms refer to as the ‘righteous’, the ‘wise’, the covenant people of God.
Their proper response to living in relationship with God is praise.
Their response to their circumstances, good or bad, is honest, heartfelt, trusting prayer.
This is to be our response too.

TYPES OF PSALMS

But if we think ‘praise’ means that only happy faces are welcome in God’s presence, or that praising God means singing only happy, ‘feel-good’ songs, the Book of Psalms will definitely put us right. There are many different kinds of psalms (‘genres’), all of them praising God in different ways. Some we would expect to find, like psalms of wisdom, kingship, confidence, thanksgiving, solemn remembrance as well as hymns of praise. But one third of the psalms are perhaps unexpected. These are the laments that express pain, suffering, sorrow, betrayal, disorientation, protest and even feelings of abandonment by God. The lament is the most common psalm type in the whole book – more than fifty of the 150 psalms.

Of the laments, Paul House writes, “Those who decide to serve the one God will be challenged and attacked by those who do not. Circumstances such as foreign armies’ attacks and exile itself place faithful remnant believers in harsh situations. Their confession is that God has delivered them in the past and will do so again in the new distress. It is this faith that marks their prayers with hope instead of despair.” (“Old Testament Theology”, IVP) The faithful have always been an oppressed minority, even within Israel, as David experienced during his time as a fugitive from King Saul. Book 1 contains many of his laments during this time.

It’s good to know God is not shocked by our complaints or our dark times. On the contrary, he welcomes our honest unburdening of ourselves in his presence. And we remember that one of the most anguished cries ever uttered comes from Psalm 22 which we will look at this term: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” It became the cry of Jesus, God’s own Son, as he hung on the cross, despised and rejected for us.

Since God is not shocked by raw, honest outpourings brought to him by his children, neither must we be as we read them. We may need to remind ourselves that the psalmists’ world was very different to our modern Western world. They didn’t take for granted that tomorrow would always come. They didn’t expect that life should always be safe, smooth and prosperous. Their very survival was constantly threatened by possible attack from enemies, incurable diseases, hunger, natural disasters and human brutality.

They knew nothing of social security, antibiotics, hospitals, supermarkets, communications networks, garbage collections and sewerage systems that cushion us. Yes, we suffer too, but most of our Christian brothers and sisters in the world today are closer to the world of the psalmists than we are.

And as well, they felt very keenly their struggle with personal sin in the light of God’s utter holiness.

How can these psalms of lament be an expression of positive, faithful praise? Because the psalmists took their grief to the LORD and believed he would always be true to his promises no matter what, no matter how long it took, no matter how fierce the opposition.

The laments show us faith under pressure; faith that is pushed to the limit, but faith that knows where to look and what to do with serious suffering and terrifying doubts.

They face up to feelings, but choose to make biblical assumptions about God: he does care; he does hear; he is able to save; he will save.

Jesus was both the faithful Sufferer and God's perfect provision of eternal salvation.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The Book of Psalms is made up of five smaller books. This term we will be studying psalms 1-41 which make up Book 1. Each of the five books in the Psalter ends with praise and the book as a whole concludes with five psalms of praise known as the Hallel. The book of Psalms was assembled after the nation's return from exile in Babylon. Traditionally it is said that Ezra the priest put the book together from smaller collections of psalms for use in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. We see evidence of these earlier sub-collections as we read through the book.

There has been much debate over the way the psalms are arranged in the book. The reason for the present order isn't certain and many different suggestions have been made. Clearly the psalms weren't simply added as they were written. One helpful suggestion has been that the themes of the five books reflect five stages in Israel's history. It's a reasonable suggestion although there appear to be some obvious exceptions.

If this is accepted, then Book 1 (Psalms 1-41) reflects David's call, his time as a refugee from King Saul and his early reign. All but four of the psalms in Book 1 have titles (superscriptions) related to David. Some one half of all the psalms of David are found in this section and most of the rest in Book 2.

The themes of Book 2 (Psalms 42-72) also relate to David but also reflect Solomon's reign and temple worship.

In Book 3 (Psalms 73-89) David is hardly mentioned and the growth of wickedness in Israel is emphasized. It ends with a historical summary of Israel's failures.

In Book 4 (Psalms 90-106) the threat of invasion looms and the people are found in exile. The book ends with prayer for rescue (Psalm 106:47).

Book 5 (107-150) celebrates return from exile and related themes. It ends the Psalter on a grand finale of praise.

BOOK 1 STRUCTURE.

The first two – and perhaps three – psalms in Book 1 serve to introduce the major themes of the whole collection.

Psalm 1 lays down the principles for wisdom, or how to live smart. Since this is God's world and we are answerable to him, we are wise if we live according to his law (Torah). And, equally, we are fools if we don't. God's written word is vital to the people of God.

Psalm 2 expresses the fundamental principle of the universe: God is King. He rules Israel and the nations. There can be no effective rebellion against his rule. Psalm 1 begins, and Psalm 2 ends with a statement about who is blessed by God.

But this doesn't mean life will always go smoothly. Indeed we need to be reminded of these solid foundations of wisdom and of God's rule *because* it doesn't. Psalm 3 is a lament that faces the reality that in a world hostile to God's rule the faithful will suffer. But God is greater than those who are against us and he will keep his promises to his faithful ones.

ISRAEL'S FAITHFUL LORD

As you read Book 1 of the psalms you will notice that God is mostly addressed by his covenant name, the LORD. It is easy to slide over that name without stopping to think what it means. It is highly significant. This was the name God gave to Moses by which Israel, his chosen people, were to know him. We read where the LORD gave this name in Exodus chapter 3:13-15:

“Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”

This holy yet very personal name, YAHWEH, the great I AM, is represented in our English Bibles by the word, LORD. Don't miss it! It is more than just a name. It speaks of the whole character of God pledged to Israel in self-binding, faithful, personal, guaranteed commitment. The people were to respond in obedient loyalty to him alone and serve him faithfully.

In Exodus 19:4-6, as the people camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the LORD told Moses to give the people of Israel this message:

“You yourself have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

The psalmists, and in Book 1 David in particular, rely on this relationship, these promises and above all, the unchanging commitment of this LORD to his people. His word or law is the platform on which they stand. In the psalms we see the inseparable connection between trusting and obeying. We might cringe at the description of God's people as “the righteous”, but this is not self-righteousness. It is grace received,

believed and applied to every aspect of life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes.” Faith and faithfulness belong together.

ISRAEL’S COMING KING

In time the LORD made further great promises to Israel and these, too, are reflected on in the Psalms. David became Israel’s king (God’s messiah, anointed one through whom God ruled his people). To David the LORD made an astonishing commitment. 2 Samuel 7 records David’s desire to build the LORD a ‘house’ (a temple), but instead the LORD promised he would build a ‘house’ (a royal dynasty) for David. One of his descendants, from his royal line, would rule over an eternal throne. This promise is a key theme in the psalms. We know this descendant of David was Jesus: Messiah, Anointed One, the Christ. The kingship psalms point to his rule, as in Psalm 2, but some laments also point to his suffering as in Psalm 22.

Jesus would fulfill all the psalmists’ longings for lasting rescue and eternal life. The same LORD who committed himself to be Israel’s Saviour would send his Son to be Saviour of the world. Many of David’s psalms in Book 1 look beyond his present circumstances and foreshadow the coming of Jesus. The LORD would save his people from ‘the pit’ or grave. He would gain the victory over evil and evildoers. He would heal the repentant sinner. He would lift us out of the slimy pit, set our feet on a rock and give us a firm place to stand. He would put a new song (a salvation song) in our mouths, a hymn of praise to our God. All the psalmists’ hopes, longings and expectations were and will be finally and fully realized in Jesus.

Psalm 40:1-4a:

**“I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear
and put their trust in the LORD.**

**Blessed is the man
who makes the LORD his trust.**