

Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life - Lesson 2.

Psalms: Ancient Prayers for Modern People.

I. Introduction.

Perhaps the most popular book in the Old Testament is the book of Psalms. It seems that almost everybody loves the Psalms. In all cultures, at all times, people have turned to the Psalms for comfort, for encouragement, for delight, to help them express themselves to God as they have turned to Him in prayer. One reason for this is that the Psalms contain not only God's Word to us, but in a certain sense our words to God. The Psalms are all His Word. They are all His inspiration, but they are intended to be used by us to express to Him the things that are of concern. It turns out that in ancient Israel, the Psalms were used exactly this way. They were used by people and groups, who had one kind of thing or another that they wanted to get across to the Lord.

In other words, the Psalms are kind of samples or examples or perhaps guidelines that help a worshiper express to God what is on his or her mind. The Psalms constitute a big book; there is no Bible book bigger than the Psalter with its 150 psalms. You get some short ones, but you get some massive ones, like Psalm 119, far and away the longest chapter in the Bible. But it is not so much the length of a psalm. It is not so much where it is found in the groupings that are called books within the Psalter (those five books). It is not so much the individual vocabulary or the like. And it is certainly not the tunes, even though we know that every psalm was sung. We know that every psalm was a musical poem; it must have had a tune. We just cannot recover them now. What really is important about the psalms are their categories. If you know the categories, if you know the types of psalms, then you can employ them as they were intended to be employed.

Before we go into those categories, I do want to say something that is related to all of the categories. The Psalms are intended to be as all-purpose as possible. We can tell that from the way that they are written. The Psalms have an outlook that everybody is supposed to be able to identify with. If you have got a circumstance, there is supposed to be a psalm there to help you. If you have an interest, there is something in the Psalms to channel your interest, as God wants it channeled. We must think of the Psalms as all-purpose. This, I think, is one of the reasons that they have had such popularity at so many times and places. So many different people can unite around their love of the Psalms.

II. Ten Types of Psalms.

A. Lament Psalms.

The ten types of psalms, when understood, are really useful. The first of these types and most frequent in the Psalter is what we call the lament psalms. A lament is a type of prayer that is prayed when one is in a situation of trial or trouble, and when one is seeking a way out, when one is seeking deliverance. Let's look at the structure of the laments. We can take the time to do this and should because the laments actually constitute about seventy of the Psalms. They

are far and away the most frequent types in the Psalter. One might say that there are seventy chapters in the Bible devoted to helping people through their suffering.

There are six ingredients in a typical lament psalm: (a) There is the address, in other words, God's name is always invoked, "O Lord" or "O my God." You are not just praying out there, somewhere, to some sort of cosmic noodle soup; you are praying to the Lord, someone who knows you and loves you, and whom you presumably know as your Lord and Savior.

(b) Then there is the complaint: we call this by its standard, typical, traditional name, but it is really the section of the psalm that describes what trouble you are in, your misery, your suffering. Now interestingly, the complaint section of these lament psalms is virtually always one of four types of situations.

(1) The most frequent is being surrounded by enemies who are about to kill you. (2) The second-most frequent is being trapped somehow, maybe in a pit or in a deep, watery miry clay. (3) The third is being very sick, terribly sick, so that you are feverish and your body aches and you are miserable and your throat burns. (4) The fourth is the process of dying, sometimes even drifting down to hell metaphorically.

The problems in the complaint sections of the laments never include family problems, never include finances, and never include difficulty with the tax authorities, the equivalent of the IRS. They never include homework; they never include job difficulties and conflicts. But that is not because they do not cover those. It is because the psalmists tried to pick a few themes that, in their minds, stood for being really miserable, really suffering. The most common one, for example, is being surrounded by enemies about to kill you. This is not the case of you are just caught in warfare, but this is the whole world hates you. All kinds of people have come around you and they are laughing at you, and mocking you, and insulting you, and are just about to kill you to rid the earth of you, who are to them scum. That is the kind of thing, the kind of picture one gets in a lament psalm.

Why? Because that is the most common thing we experience in life? No, because these are intended to be sample complaints. In effect, the psalmist is saying, "You fill in at this spot what your problem really is." If your problem is financial, if your problem is a matter of your family, if your problem is social, if your problem is some psychological thing, you fill it in. We will put in an instance in the psalm, but you understand in your own mind that this is just a trigger for you whatever the difficulty is. And so, those four kinds of complaints, surrounded by enemies, confinement, sickness, death, stand for whatever your problem really is. The psalms are all-purpose in that way.

The psalmists have tried in those complaint sections to give instances that really are bad. What you do not want is a psalm that you go to for comfort, to pray to the Lord, that has as its complaint the fact that your hip joints may ache a bit on rainy days. That is not going to help you if you have got a more serious problem. We say, "You cannot out-complain the psalmist." The psalmist lists extreme kinds of circumstances: horrible confinements, terrible illnesses,

actually dying, and being surrounded by a world of enemies that just hate you. It lists those in order to give you the sense that your misery, whatever it is, is understood; the psalm is at least as miserable in its complaint section as your particular problem.

(c) We have the address, the complaint, but then comes an expression of trust. In these psalms God may be trusted. He has proved Himself faithful in the past, and He can be trusted now to deliver. (d) Then comes the actual plea for deliverance, very briefly, perhaps nothing more than just "save me, O Lord." (e) Then there is some kind of statement of assurance; sometimes this may even have been said by a third party. When people sang these psalms as musical prayers in the temple, it is quite possible that one of the temple singers or priests actually gave the word of assurance. (f) Then there is some kind of a word of praise that typically finishes off these psalms.

Now the order may not always be as we have described it, the elements may be reversed in some way, and there may be repetition of elements throughout a given psalm. But one can see this frequent lament type illustrated in Psalm 3: "O Lord (that is the address), how many are my foes (the complaint)! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him (there is the picture of enemies mocking and hating him and reviling him).'"

Then comes the statement of trust: "But you are a shield around me, O Lord" (This can even be translated in the original, "You are my benefactor, my protector.") "You bestow glory on me and lift up my head." Then the plea for deliverance, "To the Lord I cry aloud. He answers me from His holy hill." A word of assurance, "I lie down and sleep. I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side." Another deliverance plea: "Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God. Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked." Is this because the psalmist likes to see people get hurt? No, because in the spirit of the psalm, the enemies stand for whatever the psalmist's problems are. So we can say, "Crush those problems; get rid of them for me please, O Lord."

Then finally the element of praise: "From the Lord comes deliverance. Your blessing is on your people." Or as it can also be translated, "May your blessing be on your people." Notice the balance in a prayer like that, it is not all petition; you are not just asking. You are also expressing trust and assurance, and you are also praising God for who He is and for His faithfulness to you in the past and presumably in the future. That is one type of psalm, the lament, and knowing what it stands for helps make it all the more useful to us. Now we realize that when one sees a psalm that is like that (and you can spot them very easily by their structure and their themes), one knows that here is comfort in whatever kind of suffering or trial, major or minor, may come your way. Naturally, one wants to use the psalm appropriately. You would not choose to read a lament typically at a wedding! And you would not choose to use an individual lament when it is a group concern; rather, you will pick one of the corporate laments.

B. Thanksgiving Psalms.

A second type of psalm is the thanksgiving psalm. These psalms are prayed after one has gotten out of the kind of misery described in the lament psalm. Their purpose is to thank God for

deliverance. The deliverance now has come, and you are no longer in the misery; you are out, so you pray a thanksgiving psalm. These have a characteristic structure of first, (a) an introduction, an intention to give thanks to God, then (b) the misery is described, then (c) the appeal that was given to God, then (d) the actual rescue (these are all in the past tense because the rescue has come), then finally (e) a testimonial of gratitude to God for delivering you (sometimes that testimonial takes the form of a promise to worship).

The most basic thing any believer can do is worship God. The most basic thing a person who is grateful to God can do is to give God worship, to declare His greatness; to praise Him, the essence of worship. We have a couple dozen of those psalms, the thanksgiving psalms in the Psalter. They are completely appropriate for the individual or group situation where people are thankful for something that has gone well. Again, the miseries in these psalms are of the four basic types that we talked about in connection with the laments. The miseries are usually either enemies or confinement or illness or death, standing for whatever you are actually in that was hard for you.

C. Hymns.

A third type of psalm is the hymn. We think of a hymn as meaning something we sing out of a hymnbook in church. But the more technical meaning of the word, as we use it in connection with Psalms, is a song of praise to God, which is specially directed to God as a psalm of praise to Him. There are three types of these for the most part: (a) one type is praising God as Creator, so we call these Creator hymns; their purpose is to glorify God for being the Creator of all. (b) A second type is called an Israel hymn. These are the types of psalms that praise God for creating a people and for protecting that people throughout their long lineage. (c) A final type is called history hymns. These are psalms that use as their basic theme the fact that God has been watching over history.

You know, in a lot of religions of the world, the gods and goddesses are not closely related to history. They just sort of exist, and what happens in history is not too closely related to your religion. But biblical faith is a very historical faith. God is at work in the world at all times. We might not be able to discern it (most of the time we can barely figure it out well in hindsight), but God is at work and that is what the history hymns emphasize.

Now, there is a structure to these types of psalms as well, and it is very simple. You can remember it by the initials SRR: (a) there is a summons to praise, then (b) a reason to praise (or in fact a long list of reasons sometimes), and then (c) a recapitulation. So the summons may be as simple as "let us praise the Lord," and then the reasons are usually introduced by "for" or "because"; and they constitute the heart of the psalm. And then finally comes a recapitulation, which may be as simple as "praise the Lord."

D. Enthronement Psalms.

A fourth category is enthronement psalms. Enthronement psalms are psalms that speak of the way that God is King. Of course, Israel had an earthly king and they knew all about kings; every nation in their day had a king. God is "the" King over all. God is on the throne, and He is on the eternal throne, the heavenly throne. His throne is above all earthly thrones. So these psalms emphasize this: God enthroned as King. And one way or another, they will almost always

mention the word "throne" in some part of the psalm or another. Again, they are descriptive praises of God. The essence of praise, the essence of worship, is to declare God's greatness. That is what we do when we worship. We declare God's greatness. A psalm like this, an enthronement psalm, certainly does it.

E. Royal Psalms.

Another category is the royal psalm. These psalms were used to focus the attention of the people on God's good gift of government. The king is, of course, the person mentioned most in a royal psalm. These are psalms for prayers of protection. They are psalms of gratitude that God has allowed the king to lead the people in good ways.

As a royal psalm unfolds, one sees that it is not just some sort of idolizing of the human king. It is always thanks to God for the way that God benefited the king, or prayer to God for the king and that God will help the king, recognizing that the king alone, the human leader of government, can never do what is necessary on his own.

F. Psalms of Zion.

Yet another category is that of the psalms of Zion. These are psalms that can have a hymn format, they can be in the summons, reasons, and recapitulation format, but they are characterized more by their content than any particular format. They talk about Zion, about Jerusalem. Their theme fits with that of the book of Deuteronomy and many parts of the former and latter prophets in the Old Testament that describe how good it is that God has dwelt with His people and made Himself close to them, how Zion, the name of the mountain at the center of Jerusalem, was a place where God allowed the Israelites to build a temple as a symbol of His presence among them, and how He caused His name, that is, His authority, His affective presence, to be with them. Zion is a revered place in the Bible. It is very important. That is where everybody came three times a year to worship, and it is what becomes in the writings of the prophets increasingly a symbol of not only God's presence on earth, but of God's eternal presence. The theme of Zion ends up having tremendous importance in the New Testament; it is Jerusalem that symbolizes heaven eventually in the Scriptures.

G. Wisdom Psalms.

Wisdom psalms are yet another category. The wisdom psalms have a kind of simple structure. It is described as this or that, "x" or "y": Will you go in this direction or will you go in that direction? Wisdom is the making of right choices: Will you make right choices that please God and show you are a righteous person, or will you make wrong choices that displease God and show that your heart is really in the direction of evil or wickedness? In the case of the wisdom psalms, there are certain categories one can observe. Contrast between the righteous and the wicked is emphasized; conduct in life is important as a theme; the fear of the Lord is usually mentioned. Comparisons and warnings may be present because those are ways to show the options, the choices.

Many of the wisdom psalms are acrostic; that is, they go through successive letters of the alphabet as starting points for the given verses. Sometimes one will see the wording, "better

than": "This is better than that or to be preferred to that." Sometimes the wording "my son" or "my child" will be in there because that is the way that teachers addressed learners in Bible times. The teacher was often called "father" and the learner called "child." It would work that way in the family, but even the school kids called their teachers "father," and the teachers called the students "son" or "child." Also, often enough the psalm will use the word "blessed." "Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers," says Psalm 1, which is a wisdom psalm. "On the other hand, His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night."

H. Trust Psalms.

Another category is that of a trust psalm. You know, most of you who know any psalms at all know the Twenty-third Psalm, and that is a trust psalm. It is a psalm in which (a) the first part of the psalm describes trusting God as a faithful shepherd, and then (b) the second part describes trusting God as a faithful host. In the first part of the psalm, you can trust Him because He is going to take good care of you, His sheep. In the second part, when you go to God's house, He feeds you well. He protects you against any harm that might come your way, your enemies, and you have abundance, so much so that you want to stay there forever. "I am going to stay in the Lord's house forever."

I. Liturgy Psalms.

Liturgies are another category. This is a little bit of a catchall category because liturgy simply means, "wording that may be used in worship." But we believe that in certain kinds of worship settings, liturgies like Psalm 15 or Psalm 68 or Psalm 82 were employed to emphasize one part of the service or another, one truth within the process of the worship service or life at the temple.

J. Torah Psalms.

A final category is that of the Torah psalm. There are not many of these, but it just happens that Psalm 119, the really big psalm in the Psalter, is a Torah psalm. Torah is a Hebrew word that means "the Law," the Mosaic Law, the covenant Law. These psalms emphasize the importance of knowing God's revealed truth. You want to know the Word of God, and they praise the benefits of knowing the Word, how valuable it is for you, and how important it is that you know it in order to please God.

III. Conclusion.

These are the ten basic types. If you know them, you can use them. You will sense them if you are aware of the categories as you read through the Psalter. You will employ them in your own prayer life as you should and as you are encouraged to do by the way that they are written. You will use them in worship and benefit from them in that context. They are all written to be both God's Word to us and as an encouragement to us to be our words to God as well.