



# PSALMS: THE PRAYER BOOK OF JESUS

Session 2: The Art of the Psalms: Poetry

“I have been accustomed to call this book... ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,’ for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life of all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities—in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated...

There is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises toward us are celebrated with such splendor of diction... There is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God.”

– John Calvin, preface to his commentary on the Psalms

## PSALM 119:105-112, *Lucerna pedibus meis*

Your word is a lantern to my feet \*

and a light upon my path.

I have sworn and am steadfastly purposed \*

to keep your righteous judgments.

I am troubled above measure; \*

revive me, O Lord, according to your word.

Let the freewill offerings of my mouth please you, O Lord; \*

and teach me your judgments.

My life is always in my hand, \*

yet I do not forget your law.

The ungodly have laid a snare for me, \*

yet I have not strayed from your commandments.

Your testimonies have I claimed as my heritage for ever, \*

and why? They are the very joy of my heart.

I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes always, \*  
even unto the end.

—

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;\*

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

# WHAT ARE THE PSALMS?

- **Name:** "Psalms" means "Songs of Praises"
- **Format:** Five books. 150 psalms. 2,461 verses.
- **Genre:** Poetry
- **Date:** ca. 1500 B.C. - ca. 539. From the time of Moses until after the Babylonian Exile.
- **Audience:** the People of God.
- **Main character:** God
- **Authors (under God's inspiration):**
  - 73 attributed to David
  - 77 Psalms by other poets:
    - Moses (1)
    - Solomon (2)
    - Asaph (12)
    - Heman (1)
    - Ethan (2)
    - The Sons of Korah (11)
    - Anonymous (48)

# WHAT ARE THE PSALMS?

- Purpose:
  - To give poetic expression to the feelings of believers in YAHWEH (first Israel, then Christians).
  - To meditate on his character.
  - To showcase works of literary beauty.
  - To record the human response to God, nature, worship, suffering, and many other human experiences.
  - To provide texts for public and private worship.

## THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

"Psalms is solidly theocentric in its orientation. God is the central reality around which everything else is arranged. With God at the center, next in importance is the composite 'psalmist,' the poet and speaker of the poems who assumes a composite identity in our thinking and our experience of the psalms as a group. This psalmist is a poet, a master of words, an artist, someone with unusual introspective ability... and thoroughly religious in his orientation. Then, in a third circle outward, we find the community of believers. They come from many walks of life: farming, homemaking, warfare, parenting, worship leaders. These people work, worship, cook, raise children, play music, walk in nature, tend sheep, and so forth. They are just like our neighbors and us."

– Leland Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*

# THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- Genre: **Poetry**
- “A form of writing that consists primarily of figures of speech, including images... Poetry consists primarily of figurative language, while prose ordinarily consists of direct statements. Additionally, poetry is written in verse form, while prose is not.” (Leland Ryken, *Literary Forms in the Bible*)
  - Poems are usually either meditative or emotional in nature (or both).
  - Compared to stories and ordinary prose, poems are disjointed.
  - The line is the recurrent unit, not the sentence.
  - Poets think in images of concrete realities (light, path, run) rather than abstractions (I feel...). However, poets prefer the figurative to the literal. Concrete realities are symbolic.
  - The building block in narrative is the scene or episode; in poetry, it is, broadly defined, the image.

# THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- **Poetic terms and forms** (from Leland Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*)
  - **Image:** A word naming a thing or action
  - **Imagery:** The totality of images in a poem or a cluster of images from a single area of life.
  - **Allusion:** A reference to history or past literature.
  - **Apostrophe:** An address to someone or something absent as though present.
  - **Connotation:** The feelings, association, or overtones that a word or image carries in addition to its denotative meaning.
  - **Hyperbole:** Conscious exaggeration for the sake of effect (usually emotional).
  - **Metaphor:** An implied comparison between two things without using the formula Like or as; metaphor asserts that A *is* B (not simply *like* B).



## THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- **Paradox:** An apparent contradiction between two things that upon analysis can be resolved and thereby seen to express truth.
- **Personification:** Attributing human qualities to something non-human.
- **Simile:** A comparison between two things using the formula like or as.
- **Symbol:** An image or event that possesses, in addition to a literal meaning, one or more other meanings; in symbolism, something literal represents or stands for something in addition.

# THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- The Psalms' form of verse: **Parallelism**
- A significant characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism of lines in which the second (or, rarely, third) line can be **synonymous**, **antithetical**, **synthetic** ("progressive"), or **climactic** of the first.
  - "In Judah God is known, / his Name is great in Israel" (76:1, synonymous)
  - "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, / but the way of the ungodly will perish" (1:7 [6], antithetic)
  - "As a deer desires the water brooks, / so my soul longs for you, O God" (42:1, synthetic)
  - "Ascribe unto the LORD, O you families of the peoples, / Ascribe unto the LORD worship and power" (96:7, climactic)

# THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- Primary forms of poetry in the Psalms
  - **lyric**
  - **lament** ("complaint")
  - **praise** (of God)
  - **worship** ("song of Zion")
  - **nature**
  - **encomium** (praise of people)
- Additional subgenres by subject matter (these cut across the primary forms):
  - royal
  - messianic
  - wisdom
  - penitential
  - imprecatory
  - hallelujah
  - remembrance
  - trust
  - ascent/pilgrimage

# THE ART OF THE PSALMS: POETRY

- Key Doctrines in the Psalms
  - **The Nature of God:** The psalmists say as much about the attributes of God as any other book in the Bible and do so very directly.
  - **Human Nature:** The psalmists tell us about the nature of people—sometimes deeply flawed, but also sometimes exemplary in their devotion to God. Human beings are a paradox.
  - **Nature and the Physical Creation:** Next to Genesis, the psalms talk most about nature and the physical creation.
  - **Sin and Evil:** The lament (especially imprecatory) psalms show the many ways people do terrible things in God's world.
  - **Worship:** the psalms describe acts of worship and embody a full range of attitudes and feelings of worship, reverence, and joy.