

LESSON ON PSALM 1-20

June 5, 2019

Quote from Luther:

The Psalter might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook.

Book of Psalms shows us the complexity of human life.

It also contains elements of the doctrine of salvation.

It demonstrates the two dimensions of divine-human communication.

Isaiah and the Psalms are the two Old Testament books most quoted in the New Testament.

They are the primary scriptural context for some of the titles by which Jesus is identified.

Psalms have always been the scriptural book of prayer and praise for synagogues and churches.

They are used widely to nurture and guide personal meditation and devotions.

Psalms have become crucial texts for theological work.

Two-thirds of the psalms are introduced by headings that name an author.

Other psalms are sometimes called *orphan* psalms because they do not *belong to anybody*.

In Hebrew the lines were composed so that they could be chanted or sung.

Psalms were meant to be used in the religious community to serve the purpose it was composed.

Psalm 1

It is a wisdom psalm and is an excellent choice to head the collection of psalms.

It affirms the moral compass that it pays to be good.

Wicked will be paid back for their evil.

It does not have a heading so it is considered an orphan psalm.

Psalm 2

It was composed in response to a specific historical situation.

Any attempts to identify the circumstances or to date them have been unsuccessful.

It could be against an alliance of nations or against a situation where they were in bondage.

Psalm 3

A *Psalm of David* tends to imply authorship however the Hebrew preposition is ambiguous.

It could mean *of* or *by* or *belonging to* or *for*.

When he fled from his son Absalom has no historical authority.

Psalm is spoken by someone overwhelmed by relentless enemies.

Editor would have tied this to the time when David fled after Absalom took over his throne.

Selah is generally accepted as a choral or musical notation but it has no definition.

Psalm is composed to serve as a prayer.

It uses invocations to call on the Lord and addresses the Lord directly in most of its lines.

It is the voice of a person in trouble calling upon the Lord for help.

As a prayer it also functions as a psalm of praise and instruction (Torah Psalm).

Vs. 1-2	Describes the trouble that is the reason and need for prayer
Vs. 3-6	Statements of the trust on which the prayer is based
Vs. 7	Petition for help supported by another statement of confidence in the Lord
Vs. 8	Concludes with a sentence of praise and a wish for a blessing from the Lord

Coherence of functional and rhetorical elements –

- 1) Word *many* connects the first three measures together in vs. 1-2.
It is echoed in vs. 6-7 with the words *ten thousands* and *all my enemies*.
- 2) The enemy in vs. 2 states there is no help for the psalmist if he puts his trust in God.
In contrast vs. 8 is clear that deliverance belongs to the Lord.
- 3) In Hebrew the word for *help* is the same word for *deliverance*.
- 4) Assertion of trust moves from statements about God to statements about the psalmist.
It holds together the one trusted and the one who trusts.

History of the Psalms

Psalms are difficult to date and are placed during broad periods of time.

Individual psalms come from different backgrounds that cover the course of Israel's history.

Composition of psalms started with the beginning of corporate worship in Israel.

Psalmists in Israel used genres and compositional styles common to that culture.

Some psalms reveal Israel's struggles against Canaanite religion during the early monarchy.

In other psalms the theology of the law points to the postexilic period.

Personal identity of the authors is largely unknown.

Psalms are therefore sorted into groups based on similarity of elements, vocabulary, and purpose.

Korahites and the Asaphites were guilds of temple musicians (1 and 2 Chronicles).

Psalms attributed to them are Asaph – Psalm 50, 73-83 and Korah – Psalms 42-49, 84-84, 87-88

Through them the great themes of Israel's worship as a community are heard.

At some stage in their history the psalms were assembled in groups called books.

Earliest attributions of some psalms to David are based on 1 Chronicles 15-16.

There are two collections of books attributed to David (Psalms 3-41 and 51-72)

End of the second series is marked by a note (Psalm 72:20)

Last psalm in each collection or book has a concluding doxology (41:13)

Some revisions took place to replace the name of the Lord (YHWH) with God (Elohim)

Psalm 4

Hebrew word *menatseah* means *leader* or the person directing the music.

Literal sense of the words *for the flutes* in Hebrew is *melodies*.

It is associated with plucking strings.

Vs. 1 includes the phrase (or some variation) to introduce a psalm of supplication.

Vs. 4 identifies the situation (he is being mocked by those who say he is beyond hope).

Psalm 5

In Hebrew the words *for the flutes* are not a correct translation but should read *nehilot*.

Musical instrument is not identifiable.

Vs. 1 suggests another psalm of supplication.

Vs. 7 indicates the enemies are prepared to do violence to the speaker.

Vs. 10 gives a startling image of how lethal was their intent.

Psalm 6

Sheminith is an eight-stringed lute.

What type of psalm is it?

Why is the speaker in dire straits this time?

What is wrong with the one who writes this psalm?

What changes in vs. 8?

Psalm 7

In this psalm we hear a prayer for deliverance from enemies.

Taking refuge in the Lord or *making the Lord one's refuge* is a favorite and frequent metaphor.

Hebrew verb meant *to take shelter from bad weather* or *seek a refuge from enemies*.

As a metaphor it belongs to the vocabulary of trust.

Opening declaration tells us what the intention of the whole prayer is.

Prayer is a way of taking shelter in the salvation of God who provides.

Defining petition is the appeal found in vs. 8

Accusers are persecutors whose hostility is compared to the ferocity of a lion in vs. 1-2.

In support of his innocence, the accused invokes a curse upon his life if he is found guilty.

Vs. 4 suggest the injury was against one with whom he should have been his ally.

Prayer seeks from the Lord a decision that will uphold the innocent.

It also seeks the persecution by the guilty in the end.

Vs. 10-11 express confidence in God as righteous and a relentless judge.

Vs. 12-16 express belief that those who plot harm against others will only experience hurt.

Prayer concludes with a vow of praise.

Prayer sounds like it is based on one's own righteousness and integrity.

How can anyone possibly ground prayer on such a basis with any sense of honesty?

Part of the answer comes from recognizing the purpose for which the prayer was composed.

Not intended to be a litany of self-righteousness before God.

Prayers were composed for a person who was in the right (in comparison with an antagonist).

It is a profession of faithfulness to the Lord.

It is the wrong that puts faithfulness in question.

Situation and intention of the psalm are not the whole answer.

Apart from the righteousness of the Lord this prayer could not even be voiced.

Based on the relationship it is the righteousness of the Lord that calls forth his righteousness.

In a world where wickedness is its own punishment, the innocent can pray with confidence.

Things work out because God stands in the shadows and keeps watch over his own.

Heading appears to be one of thirteen that refer to a psalm based on a Biblical story of David.

However, no Benjamite named Cush can be found in the story of David or anywhere else.

Reference remains a mystery.

Psalm 8

Designated psalm for the New Year (Festival of the Holy Name) and for Trinity Sunday

Psalms 9 and 10

Septuagint presents Psalms 9 and 10 as a single psalm and might have been that way originally. In Hebrew, Psalm 9 begins as an alphabetic acrostic:

- ב אודה יהוה, בכל-לבי; 2 I will give thanks unto the LORD with my whole heart; I will
אספרה, כל-נפלאותיך. tell of all Thy marvelous works.
- ג אשמחה ואעלה כה; 3 I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name,
אזמרה שמך עליון. O Most High:
- ד בשוב-אויבי אחר; יקשלו 4 When mine enemies are turned back, they stumble and perish
ויאבדו, מפניך. at Thy presence;
- ה כי-עשית, משפטי ודיני; 5 For Thou hast maintained my right and my cause; Thou sittest
ישבת לכסא, שופט צדק. upon the throne as the righteous Judge.
- ו גערת גוים, אבדת רשע; 6 Thou hast rebuked the nations, Thou hast destroyed the
שם מחית, לעולם ועד. wicked, Thou hast blotted out their name forever and ever.

Verses 2 and 3 (aleph)

Verse 4 (bet)

Verse 6 (gimmel)

Vs. 5 – a line of poetry was interspersed between the acrostic lines (unlike other acrostic psalms).

Psalm 10 starts with the next letter of the alphabet (after vs. 19) and then the acrostic disappears. It resurfaces near the end of the psalm with the last six letters of the alphabet.

Second half of the psalm is in all likelihood defective.

At some point in the history of its transmission, a single authoritative copy was damaged.

Lines of verse may have been patched into the text from other sources.

By the time of the Middle Ages, the editors would have no longer realized it was acrostic.

It may have been the time that it broke into two separate psalms.

Psalm 12

Psalm falls into the category of supplication but it is in a sub-category (prophetic supplication).

Purpose is similar to that of the prophets.

Speaker scans what is going on in society in a harsh light of moral criticism.

Psalm 14

Another prophetic psalm but lacks any element of supplication.

Speaker who denounces society does not put himself as a victim.

Psalm 16 (Easter)

Psalm is a prayer that starts with a brief petition for the protection of God.

In you I take refuge is a formula we saw in Psalm 7 for trusting our lives to the care of God.

Rest of the prayer is an explanation of that trust.

Trust is defined as the experiences we have that open our consciousness to the Lord.

Psalmist confesses – *You are my Lord* – and the reverse is the confession – *I am your servant*.

As servant of the Lord he receives the goodness that comes from no other source but the Lord.

Because he belongs to the Lord, he is confident that his needs will be met.

Trust is monotheistic so his commitment to the Lord is exclusive.

Holy and mighty deities whom others in the land worship are a source of trouble.

He does not recognize them or participate in their worship.

Lord as his *portion and cup* refer to passages in Joshua.

Occupation of the Promised Land was the outcome of God's salvation of Israel.

Tribes, clans, and individuals were given a portion as their heritage determined by casting lots.

Through praise the psalmist keeps the Lord in the center of his attention.

He is open to the instruction of the Lord that comes through the guidance of his conscience.

Praise makes the psalmist conscious of the power and loving-kindness of the Lord.

As a result he is not threatened and unsettled by lesser things.

Vs. 9-11 shows trust is confidence in the face of death.

He is confident in the knowledge that the Lord will not surrender his faithful one to Sheol.

Death in the psalms is not only the loss of one's existence but the loss of the presence of God.

Life means being able to enjoy the presence of God.

In every one of the lines in this prayer the psalmist is stating that the Lord is everything to him.

In vs. 2 the confession – *I have no good apart from you* – echoes through the rest of the song.

It points to the references to pleasant places, goodly heritage, and complete joy.

Life is consummated in joy.

Where death is removed as a threat, life is finally free for complete joy in the presence of God.

Context –

It could be the prayer of an Israelite who was threatened by an untimely death.

It could be the prayer in the corporate worship of Israel after the exile was over.

Representative Israelite in Lamentations 3 (in the midst of losing everything) states –

The Lord is my portion (Lamentations 3:24)

It could be the general prayer of the faithful who does not yet have the doctrine of eternal life.

Nevertheless they cannot imagine a future life apart from life in the presence of God.

Language of the psalm speaks of an unbroken relationship between the Lord and life.

Psalm 17

A Prayer of David – one of several times in which *tefilah* (prayer) is used.

Other psalms use *mizmor* (psalm) instead.

Psalm 18

Superscription of this psalm is extraordinarily long.

It reflects an editorial desire to fit it into the biography of David.

It is essentially the same poem as the one that appears in 2 Samuel 22 (older version).

Psalm 19

Contemplation of the speaker resembles that of Psalm 8.

However, the imagery changes direction from that of Psalm 8.

Psalm 20

Text is a royal psalm and is a prayer for the welfare of the anointed king.

Language duplicates many phrases found in pagan hymns written on papyrus.

Pagan hymns were composed in 2nd century BC in Egypt and in Aramaic.

Both could have drawn from an earlier Canaanite polytheistic poem.

Summary

Psalm 1	Not a prayer or hymn but a statement about human existence
Psalm 2	Paired with the first psalm as a double introduction to the <i>Book of Psalms</i>
Psalm 3	Prayer for help composed in the style of the first person
Psalm 4	An individual prayer for help (trouble caused by lies)
Psalm 5	Power of the lie threatens the life of the faithful
Psalm 6	Prayer for help is an appeal to the grace of God against the wrath of God
Psalm 7	Prayer of deliverance from enemies
Psalm 8	First hymn of praise
Psalm 9 / 10	A collective song of the people who live in faith in the midst of afflictions
Psalm 11	Song of trust that when threatened they will rest on their faith
Psalm 12	Prayer for the saving help of the Lord when wickedness is dominant in society
Psalm 13	Shortest of the prayers in the <i>Book of Psalms</i>
Psalm 14	Instructs and encourages the lowly righteous in the face of wickedness
Psalm 15	Psalm is liturgy (not law)
Psalm 16	Prayer for the protection of God and also an explanation of trust
Psalm 17	Prayer from a person who trusts in God and appeals for deliverance
Psalm 18	It is a sequel to Psalm 2 where the Lord ordains the anointed king
Psalm 19	World witnesses to God
Psalm 20	Composed for the ceremonies concerned with the office of the one who rules

Main Source

Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching by James Luther Mays
Hebrew Bible

Assignment

June 12 Psalm 21-41