

The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Chapter 5 – The Psalm of Descriptive Praise or Hymn (H)

INTRODUCTION

- Psalm of Descriptive Praise or Hymn (H)
- H Psalms: 8; 19A; 29; 33; 57:7-11; 65; 66:1-7; 89:5-18; 100; 103; 104; (105); (107); 111; 113; 117; 134-136; 139; 145-150
- H outside of the Psalms; Exodus 15, Isaiah 12, Jeremiah 10:6-16

THE LITURGICAL ACTION

- REVIEW: “Psalms of descriptive praise or hymns (H) are not the result of one single deed of God; rather, they praise God in the fullness of his existence and activity” (26).
- The psalm of descriptive praise or hymn is a uniquely liturgical song, the song of a congregation gathered for worship.
- Psalms of this sort, hymns, were often accompanied by instrumental music of various types, as can be substantiated from the Psalter (e.g. Psalm 150).
- “Because it was not prompted by any specific event (as was the case with an IP psalm), this sort of descriptive praise could be raised whenever the assembled congregation wished to honor its God; at the major festivals, at sacrifices, and at worship services of all sorts.
- H Psalms were often used in postexilic diaspora. “By using the Psalms in their homes and in their rooms, such diaspora Jews participated in the worship of their people, a worship which could not be restricted in time and place. It was in this way that the psalms of praise, especially, moved from the worship of the temple into the synagogues and then in the early Christian church” (83).

THE STRUCTURE

- The psalm of descriptive praise or hymn does not have a structure as clear-cut as the psalm of narrative praise.
- “The hymns of the Old Testament never consist only of a piling up of doxological attributes and of long chains of doxological statements. They are the unfolding of *one* basic polar statement which provides the undergirding for all psalms of this genre” (88).
- The **introduction**
 - The “call to praise,” given in the imperative
 - Originally consisted of one sentence: “Praise Yahweh”
 - Later expanded with additional words describing the Lord, or the imperatives were changed to jussives: “Let the name of the Lord be praised.”
- The **main part**
 - Includes the two sides of the praise of God which are at the center of the psalm
 - God shows his lordship and majesty by being Creator and Lord of history
 - God shows his goodness and compassion by rescuing and preserving

- Praise of the Creator: 33:6-9; 65:6-8; 135:6-7; 136:5-9; 146:6; 147:4, 8, 16-18
- Praise of the Lord of history: 33:10-12; 64:7; 135:8-12; 105:7ff; 146:3-5
- Praise the Deliverer: 65:2-3; 89:14-18; 135:14; 136:10-22; 146:7-9; 147:2-6
- Praise the Preserver: 33:19b; 111:5; 136:25; 145:14-15
- Further developments
 - Hymns are not always controlled by the two basic statements of praise in the same manner and with the same emphasis
 - Full weight of Psalm 103 is centered on the praise of God's grace
 - God's goodness in Psalm 136
 - God's majesty in Psalm 150

AN EXAMPLE OF HYMN: PSALM 113

- **Verses 1-3**
 - Call to praise
 - “It is meant as a genuine summons, which presupposes that it is both necessary (since God's praise can disappear from the lips of an individual or of a community) and possible (because, even when God's praise becomes less strong and vocal, someone is always present to summon the rest to take it up again)” (84)
 - “Every one of these calls to praise God originated in some confrontation with the living God and is intended to carry the echo of that confrontation further” (84).
 - Call to praise is extended in time and place (vs. 2-3)
 - “The praise of God should extend to the uttermost limits of time and space, for only thus can God be affirmed as the Lord of time and space, no matter how far they may extend” (84).
- **Verses 4-9**
 - Main part gives the reason for this call to praise
 - Psalms like this often consist of one singular characteristic of God that determines the descriptive praise down to the very details themselves
 - Psalm 113 hinges on verses 5 and 6
 - “In these statements at the very heart of Psalm 113 we hear the astonished echo of a basic experience with God, an echo in which *all* has been gathered that can ever be said of God: This is our God, the majestically exalted one, who does not remain in this exalted state but looks far down into our depths. This is the God who heard the cries of the children of Israel in their slavery and came down to save them. This is the God of Hannah, Samuel's mother, who hearkened to her when she cried from the depth of her despair, and who graciously favored her. This is the God to whom those who pray Psalm 123 say, “...as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master...so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he have mercy upon us” (v. 2). This is the God whom the poet of Psalm 23 celebrated: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me...” (v. 4). It is not too much to say that the affirmation at the heart of Psalm 113 is the basic statement of the praise of God in the Psalms” (86).

- This basic statement concerning God's majesty and his mercy stands at the center of all of Israel's descriptive praise.
 - The one side, God's majesty, is elaborated in v. 4 (God is high above us)
 - The other side, God's mercy, is elaborated in vv. 7-9 (God looks down)

- Verse 7 describes what was declared in the IP psalms, namely that God discovered them in their degradation and drew them up from the pit, from the underworld, from death.

- Something new is added in verses 8 and 9
 - Psalms of narrative praise only look back to the hour of rescue
 - Psalms of descriptive praise picture the new life which is given to the one who has been rescued

- Conclusion: "Thus the central statement of this type of praise (praise which celebrates the God who looks from the heights into our depths) extends from the majesty of the Lord high above the heavens to a little room in a house where a mother rejoices with her child. It extends from the festivity of a hymn sung at worship to everyday life in a village where the men sit together in the evening. But this broad scope only corresponds to the broad field of the central statement. Such is the God who is praised here" (88).