

The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Introduction

A CALL TO PRAISE

- READ Psalm 103
- Psalm 103:1-2—“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”
 - We don’t know who wrote this or what his world was like
 - The call can seem distant and strange, but it doesn’t have to be that way
 - “We should pause here a moment and marvel at what confronts us. What sort of call is this? It is neither a spiritual heirloom nor a leftover relic bearing witness to the tenacious power of religious rites; for this summons to praise has in fact succeeded in breaking through the limitations and boundaries characteristic of religions. Hence if a modern person hears and understands the call with which Psalm 103 begins, if that person takes it up and repeats it, then something inexplicable happens: this call is miraculously handed on, and, once begun, it can no longer be silenced” (6).
- “bless” and “forget not”
 - Notice the connection between “blessing” God and “forgetting not his benefits”
 - “One may indeed speak about God, and still have forgotten him long ago. One may reflect upon the nature of God, and still have long since forgotten him. Forgetting God and turning away from God always begins when praise has been silenced” (6).
 - Praise him so you don’t forget what he’s done and tell others what he’s done so they won’t forget
- Psalm 103:11-12—“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”
- Psalm 103:13-14—“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.”
 - The author contrasts the immenseness of God to the smallness of humans
 - “At this point the summons of the psalm first receives its basic tonality. ‘You infinitesimally small human, do not forget what connects your little life to the mighty dimension of eternity. Praise, praise with all your being the eternal God for sending fatherly goodness into your life; for somewhere and in some way your life participates in something which is in sharp contrast with human frailty: the steadfast love of the Lord’” (9).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PSALMS IN THE BIBLE

- Psalms, human responses to God's word and actions are heard throughout the entire Bible, from the first book to the last.
 - Whenever God acts, there must be a response of praise.
 - Passing through the Red Sea (Exodus 15)
 - Barren woman celebrates the birth of a son (1 Samuel 2)
 - Entire book of Psalms
 - Mary (Luke 1)
 - The Christ-hymn (Colossians 1)
 - The throne of heaven (Revelation 5)
- Praise and lament are the two basic melodies which, like echoes, accompany God's actions on this long path of history.
 - Sometimes we praise God for his actions
 - Sometimes we lament God for his actions
- Connection between singing and praying
 - In the Psalms, singing and praying were still united, even though they became more and more separated in later times
 - Psalms are sung prayers or prayed singing.
 - They are *prayers* (words directed to God in supplication or rejoicing), *poetry* (poetical expressions of thought), and *song* (they go beyond the mere speaking or even recital of a poem and become music) (11).
- Significance for people throughout the ages
 - "The Psalms are inexhaustible. It is an often-noted fact that in the catastrophes of the last decades the Psalms were discovered anew at many different places by many very different people. All found in them something by which our often weak and anemic praying can be renewed: an immediacy or directness of speaking to God which connects reality in all of its breadth, depth, and harshness with the God who is the Lord of both the righteous and the wicked, the God of the depths and the heights, the Lord of creation and the Lord of history" (11).

HOW THE PSALMS ORIGINATED

- Superscriptions at the beginning of the Psalms were added later
- The Psalms arose out of the worship of Israel, as an essential component of this worship in its variety of forms
- The Psalms were not first written and then sung, but vice versa
- The Psalms arose out of worship, which was interconnected to all of life
 - "Worship was not just the place where people interested in religion gathered; rather, worship was the heart in which and through which the life of all pulsed" (12).
 - "The events the Psalms speak about and out of which they arose, did not themselves take place in worship, but rather occurred in the lives of individuals or in the life of the nation" (13-14).

- Events, whether they happened to one person or to the nation, were incorporated into the Psalms, which gave voice to everyone.
 - “Here was the integrating and focusing center in which this entire fullness of speaking to God received its forms. Here the wide range of many thousand voices became, in an amazing manner, unison speech. This speech carried the deeply-flowing currents of many generations, and this center kept all changes in language, viewpoints, and social forms on one course” (15).

THE COLLECTION OF THE PSALMS

- Like our modern hymnbooks, the book of Psalms gradually grew from smaller collections
 - Book 1: Psalm 1-41
 - Book 2: Psalm 42-72
 - Book 3: Psalm 73-89
 - Book 4: Psalm 90-106
 - Book 5: Psalm 107-150
 - Each book has a doxology appended to it (the last Psalm of the book)
- Larger collections
 - Psalms 3-41 attributed to David
 - Psalms 42-83 called the Elohistic Psalter (Yahweh replaced by Elohim)
- Smaller collections
 - Psalms 42-49 are songs of Korah
 - Psalms 51-59 are psalms of David
 - Psalms 51-59 are laments of the individual (IL)
 - Enthronement psalms (93-99, excluding 94)
 - Psalms of praise (103-107)

SUPERSCRPTIONS AND NOTATIONS

- Superscriptions to the Psalms do not date to the time of their origin, but to the time when they were collected
- Psalms attributed to people do not mean that is the actual person that wrote them
 - “Actually, however, the Psalms arose anonymously, in keeping with their basic nature. The superscriptions arose later, at the time when what was traditional had to be attributed to a great personage in Israel’s history” (20).
- Musical designations are unclear
 - “to the choirmaster”
 - could be “by the outstanding one”
 - *Selah*
 - Points toward an interlude
- “But even if it is recognized that all these notations arose at the time when the Psalms were collected, the fact that we can no longer determine their original meaning does not mean our understanding of an individual psalm itself is thereby diminished” (21).

THE POETIC FORM OF THE PSALMS

- Parallelism of members
 - “synonymous parallelism”
 - Psalm 103:1—“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!”
 - “synthetic parallelism”
 - Psalm 103:2—“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”
 - “antithetic parallelism”
 - Proverbs 21:26—“All day long [the sluggard] craves and craves, but the righteous gives and does not hold back.”
- “It is a feature of the Hebrew language that *sentences* rather than words or syllables are rhymed. The rhyme occurs neither in sound nor in the number of words but in the *meaning* of the sentences” (23).

TYPES AND GENRES OF PSALMS

- Main types of psalms (realize that many psalms are composites of multiple genres)
 - Community psalm of lament (CL)
 - Individual psalm of lament (IL)
 - Community psalm of narrative praise (CP)
 - Individual psalm of narrative praise (IP)
 - Psalm of descriptive praise (hymn) (H)
- Narrative praise versus descriptive praise
 - Narrative praise: the echo of a specific act of God which has just taken place
 - Descriptive praise: they praise God in the fullness of his existence and activity
- Two other important types of Psalms
 - Liturgies
 - All those psalms in which we can recognize a combination of liturgical action and speech (e.g., Psalm 24)
 - Wisdom psalms
 - The world of the Psalms and the world of wisdom meet in the great theme of the contrast of the righteous and the wicked