

Introduction to the Psalms

I. **General Observations**

- A. Of all the Old Testament books, none has meant more to modern Christians than the Psalms. The Psalms captures the essence of what it means to walk by faith with God. They display the outpouring of the human heart to God through praise and prayer. It is a simple collection of the sighings and singings of men; an unmatched treasury of devotion, comfort, sympathy and gladdening reassurance -- all beautifully expressed in Hebrew poetry. Over the years so many Christians have felt the usefulness of this poetic book so necessary that many of our printed editions of the New Testament also contain the Psalms. Psalms is the emotional book of the Bible. While other scriptures provide a basis for our faith and action, Psalms provides for our emotions and feelings. People identify with the Psalms because they express the sentiments of real people. Here the suffering and sorrowful find a fellowship of sympathy. Here the persecuted and forsaken find reassurance in their time of need. Here the weeping and contrite penitent sinner finds comfort for a broken heart. Psalms is a people book; but not just any people -- Psalms is the book of God's people timelessly expressing their deepest feelings toward their heavenly Father.
- B. The English designation "psalm" comes from the Latin *Psalmi* and the Greek *psalmoi* ("songs sung with musical accompaniment"), a translation of the Hebrew *mizmor* ("a song accompanied by musical instruments"). The Hebrew title (*tehillim*) signifies the contents of the book: "songs of praise."
- C. The book of Psalms is first and foremost God's word to His people. We hear the voice of God in each individual psalm. Its purpose is the same as that of any part of scripture; the Psalms are "*profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Nevertheless, the Psalms are unique. In them not only does God speak to His people, but the people speak to God. God encourages us to use the language of the Psalms in our prayers and praise. By applying these ancient psalms to a new situation, the life of faith, hope and love of the individual Christian, the family and the church may be greatly enhanced.
- D. The values of the Psalms to the individual and to all Christians in general are many:
 1. It is a book of prayers, of a human being's communion with God.

2. It expresses one's praise to God for acts fulfilled in the past. God's goodness in fulfilling His past promises becomes the occasion for a hope in the future.
3. The Psalms have a distinct place in worship, having been sung by Christians throughout the centuries.
4. The Psalms reflect the experience of faith of God's people. Their expressions of frustration, impatience, anger and joy reflect the tension between reward and condemnation.
5. In the Psalms God addresses both the individual and all His people collectively.
6. The Psalms also connect the Old Testament and the New Testament. Although they belong to the Old Testament, the psalmists longed for the day of redemption. From the early church we have inherited a new perspective of reading the Psalms in the light of Jesus' mission and work.

II. ***The Study Of The Book Of Psalms***

- A. The books of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon make up the poetical books in the Old Testament. However, poetic forms are found throughout the Old Testament, especially in the prophets.
- B. The Psalms usually carry a heading. In fact, all but 34 of the Psalms bear some type of title as a superscription. The Jews referred to these 34 as "orphans." The heading or superscription may contain any or all of the following categories of information:
 1. Identification with a person.
 2. Association with a historical event.
 3. Music and worship details.
 4. The type or genre of the psalm.
- C. Though we usually associate David with the book of Psalms (his name is on 73 of them and the LXX adds 15 to that number), some of the Psalms were written anonymously and some list other authors: Asaph (50, 73-83), Solomon (72, 127), the sons of Korah (42-49, 84-85, 87-88), Ethan (89) and Moses (90). The psalms were gathered in separate collections that were eventually brought together into one book under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Several collections arose over the centuries:
 1. Smaller collections included the psalms associated with the sons of Korah (Psalms 42-49; Psalms 84-85; Psalms 87-88), with Asaph (Psalm 50; Psalms 73-83), the second Davidic psalter (Psalms 51-71), and the Hallelujah psalms (Psalms 146-50).
 2. The larger collections consisted of the psalms associated with David (Psalms 3-41; cf. 72:20) and the Elohist psalter (Psalms 42-83) --

- itself a collection of smaller collections: the Korahite (Psalms 42-49) and Davidic psalms (Psalms 51-71); the Asaphite psalter (Psalms 73-83); and the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-34). The process of collection began with smaller collections, to which individual psalms or other collections were added, resulting in the final 150 psalms.
3. In our English Bibles, the psalms are now commonly divided into five books, each ending with a doxology (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150).
 - a) Psalm 150 is a general doxology while Psalm 1 is a general introduction to the Psalms.
 - b) Psalm 2, 42, 73, 90 and 107 serve as introductions to their respective books.
 - c) According to the *Midrash on the Psalms*, an ancient Jewish commentary, the five books were intentionally created to parallel the five books of Moses.
- D. In order to best understand the book of Psalms it is necessary to understand a little about the nature of Hebrew poetry. Hebrew is a pictorial language, every word is graphic and vivid. The verbal roots portray visible action, while the usage provides room for strong imagination. Most modern poetry is based upon rhyme (parallelism of sound), or rhythm (parallelism of time). However, in Hebrew poetry there is neither a parallel of rhyme nor of rhythm, but a parallelism of ideas. The beauty of Hebrew poetry is that it can be translated into any language without losing its flavor or beauty; something that is not possible when translating rhyme or rhythm. Parallelism refers to the correspondence which occurs between the phrase of a poetic line. There are several different types of parallelism:
1. In synonymous (identical) parallelism the members of a line express the same basic idea in several different ways (e.g., 1:1).
 2. Emblematic parallelism is a form of synonymous parallelism in which one member of the line contains a figurative (metaphor or simile) development of the same thought (e.g., 44:19, 22).
 - a) A simile is a comparison which is made explicit by the presence of the word like or as (cf. 42:1; 7:1-2).
 - b) A metaphor is a comparison which is implicit; that is, it is a comparison without the mention of like or as (cf. 23:1).
 3. In antithetic parallelism the members of the line are set in contrast to one another (e.g., 44:3).
 4. In synthetic parallelism the members of a line complement one another harmoniously to create the desired effect (e.g., 12:1).
 5. Repetitive parallelism is a further development of synthetic parallelism. Not only do the members of the line harmonize, they also develop the thought colon upon colon (e.g., 29:1).

6. Internal parallelism is parallelism treated in isolation from other verses. External parallelism denotes the kind of parallelism when two or more verses are compared with one another (Psalm 30:8-10).
- E. Another major characteristic of Hebrew poetry is imagery. Imagery is manifested in the Psalms using many literary devices:
1. Acrostic refers to the poetic practice of opening each line, verse, or stanza with a different letter of the alphabet (e.g., Psalm 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145).
 2. Alliteration is the phenomenon of repeating similar sounds at the beginning of words (e.g., 22:4).
 3. Anthropomorphism is the ascribing of human form to God (e.g., 130:2).
 4. Apostrophe, which is the addressing of an imaginary audience, results from a development of personification (e.g., 68:15-16).
 5. Assonance is the phenomenon of repeating similar sounds within words (e.g., 44:7).
 6. Chiasm changes the order of the members of a line (e.g., 1:1; 51:3; 90:7; 146:2). This is also called "inversion." This is a prominent literary device found throughout the Bible.
 7. Ellipsis is the phenomenon of leaving something out of the text that must be read into the colon from the context. The effect of the ellipsis is to bind two phrase more closely together (e.g., 88:6).
 8. Hendiadys is a figure of speech in which two expressions are intended to be understood as one. Hyperbole or exaggeration creates a picture in the mind that shuns literalism (e.g., 40:12).
 9. Inclusion is a form of repetition in which the beginning and end of the section close the unit by the restatement of the same motif or words or by a contrastive statement (e.g., 70:1, 5).
 10. Merismus is a coordination of nominal phrases, expressive of totality (e.g., 105:14).
 11. Metonymy is the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant.
 12. Onomatopoeia describes a word whose sound creates the effect intended by the speaker.
 13. Paronomasia is a play on words or, better, a use of two or more identical or similarly sounding words with different nuances in meaning.
 14. Personification is when inanimate objects are addressed as if they were animate, or actual persons (e.g., 68:15-16).
 15. Repetition is inherent in the concept of symmetry, according to which words and phrases are repeated in the same, synonymous or antonymous ways. Repetition is the most important element in He-

brew poetry, for it conveys symmetry and asymmetry, harmony and dissonance. Refrain is a form of repetition (e.g., 136:1-26).

16. Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part (e.g., 18:35).

F. There are several categories of psalms:

1. Praise psalms -- offer praise to God.
2. Messianic psalms -- speak of the Person and the work of the Messiah.
3. Lament psalms -- a cry to God for help.
4. Testimonial psalms -- communicate what God has done for them.
5. The Songs of Ascent -- sung during pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem (Psalms 120-134).
6. Imprecatory psalms -- asking for judgment on wicked men.
7. Penitential psalms -- sorrowing over sin.
8. Wisdom psalms -- guidelines for godly people.
9. Historical psalms -- looking back on God's dealings with the nation of Israel.
10. Nature psalms -- the handiwork of God in Creation (Psalms 8, 104, 139).

G. The Hallel psalms are not to be confused with a literary genre.

1. Instead, they form three separate collections:
 - a) The "Egyptian Hallel" (Psalms 113-118).
 - b) The "Great Hallel" (Psalms 120-136 or Psalms 135-136 or Psalm 136; Jewish sources vary on extent).
 - c) The concluding Hallel psalms (Psalms 146-150).
2. The Hallel psalms had a significant part in the praise (*hallel*) of the Lord.
 - a) The Egyptian Hallel and the Great Hallel (most of which are pilgrimage songs: 120-134) were sung during the annual feasts.
 - b) The concluding Hallel psalms (Psalms 146-150) constituted a part of the daily prayers in the synagogues after the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70.