

## SESSION #26

### PSALMS

This second book in the biblical section of Poetry & Wisdom takes us into the Music Room of the Bible's "Temple of Truth". This book provides for our emotions and feelings the same kind of guidance as other Scriptures provide for our faith and actions. The Psalms especially affect our hearts and are therefore among the most beloved passages in the Bible.

#### **1. Major Types of Psalms**

There are at least 9 different types of psalms. I will just list them quickly but knowing these categories may be helpful for your understanding as you read the Psalms.

##### **1. Didactic**

These are psalms of formal instruction, like Psalm 1 for example.

##### **2. History**

This kind of psalm contains references to historical events of the nation of Israel. Psalm 78 is a good example of a "history" psalm.

##### **3. Hallelujah**

These psalms have a clear theme of praise to God, like Psalm 106.

##### **4. Penitential**

In these psalms, the psalmist expresses remorse and confesses his sin. Psalm 51 is the most famous psalm of this type as we see David's heart laid bare before God following his sin with Bathsheba.

## **5. Supplication**

This type of psalm contains prayers of supplication for the psalmist's own needs or interceding prayers for someone else. Psalm 86 is an example.

## **6. Thanksgiving**

Giving thanks to God is a frequent theme in this book, as Psalm 16 demonstrates.

## **7. Messianic**

These psalms speak of the coming Messiah, like Psalms 20 – 24 (we'll take a little closer look at these later).

## **8. Nature**

In these psalms the writers extoll God for His handiwork in nature, as we see in Psalm 8 for example.

## **9. Imprecatory**

These have quite a different tone to them because in these the psalmist implores God to punish the wicked. Psalm 35 is this type of psalm.

## **2. STRUCTURE**

The main thing to notice about the structure is that the Book of Psalms, all 150 of them, are packaged into five sub-books. Some of our Bibles will show those book numbers. In a sense these sub-books mirror what goes on in the five books of Moses. They have been compiled over a period of a few hundred years written mostly during the times of David and Asaph, the leader of his musicians. Some of them were compiled later by Ezra and others and put together very carefully into a set of five books matching the Pentateuch.

Book one of the Psalms has a great deal of comparison with the Book of Genesis, the first book of the five books of Moses, because this first book of Psalms has a lot to tell us about man.

Book two has much to say about deliverance, paralleling what we see happening in the book of Exodus. For example, Psalm 69, 70 and 71 are part of book two. Notice how each of these psalms begin.

Psalm 69: *“Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.”*

Psalm 70 – *“Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O LORD!”*

Psalm 71 – *“In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge; never let me be put to shame.”*

Rescue me, deliver me. That’s a major theme throughout book two much like the book of Exodus where the people were rescued and delivered from Egypt.

Book three is rather like the book of Leviticus – an emphasis on the sanctuary. You remember the book of Leviticus focussed on the Tabernacle, the presence of God living among His people, ministered to by the Levites and the priests.

And this third book of Psalms has a lot to do with the sanctuary, where God lives. Psalm 73 begins book three. It’s a fantastic psalm! The turning point in Psalm 73 is verse 17. The Psalmist Asaph was greatly concerned about a problem much like we saw in the Book of Job: why do the wicked seem to get along fine, and those who are good suffer so much? And he just couldn’t understand why that was until ...when? Verse 17 – *“until I went into ...the sanctuary of God.”* Until he got in touch with God in God’s sanctuary, then he began to understand what reality really was. And that turning point was a turning point in his faith, so that by the end of that psalm he says, *“As for me it is good to be near God.”* The sanctuary theme.

Book four stresses the time when the unrest and the wandering will cease forever in the coming Kingdom of God. Like the book of Numbers where the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness, looking for that ending to the wandering. Psalm 90, a psalm written by Moses, begins book four. Notice how it begins, verse 1: *“Lord you have been our dwelling place through all generations.”* The focus is on God our dwelling place, where we will rest, and be done with all this wandering around. It sets the theme for this book right at the beginning.

Book five – a thanksgiving for divine faithfulness, like Deuteronomy was. And like Deuteronomy, there’s a strong emphasis here on the Word of God. Remember that Deuteronomy was Moses’ farewell speech, and a second recitation of the Law. So, it’s not surprising that in book five of the Psalms we have Psalm 119 in which every verse – all 176 of them! - has something to say about the Word of God.

Not only are these psalms arranged carefully in terms of themes, but very carefully in terms of doxology. Every book ends with a doxology. For example, book one ends in Psalm 41:13: *“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and amen.”* When you hear “amen and amen” you know that sounds like a conclusion of something, doesn’t it? Well, it is – it’s the conclusion of book one. It’s a doxology, a praising God from whom all blessings flow. Amen and amen.

Every book ends with a doxology, but when you get to the end of book five how does it end? The collection of these psalms comes to a terrific climax with Psalm 150 – the whole psalm is a doxology for the whole five books.

### **3. Specific Psalms**

Let’s take a quick look at some specific psalms. Psalm 18 is a good one if you’re interested in David’s character. It gives some wonderful illustrations of what he was as a person.

See Psalm 119, with its theme about the Word of God, if you want more inspiration about the value of God’s Word.

Psalms 120 to 134 may be somewhat unknown to many. These are called songs of ascent, or songs of degrees – two different ways of interpreting how those psalms were written and why they were written. We don’t have time to examine this issue. But what is interesting is that these psalms are carefully structured, all fifteen of them.

They consist of five groups of three psalms each. So, when you get into this section of the Psalms, realize that there’s a pattern here. A group of three psalms, five times over. And every group has exactly the same triple theme.

The first psalm in each section has to do with troubles. The second has to do with trust. And the third with triumph. So, they build, build, build. And they're a wonderful collection of inspirational words from the psalmist.

We had noted Psalm 59 earlier when we were in the book of 1 Samuel, the psalm that David wrote when he was besieged by King Saul's goon squad at night. At the end of the psalm, in the midst of David's terrific stress, if you combine the NKJ and NIV you get three rhyming words as David describes the contrast between himself and the wicked.

The wicked prowl, growl and howl. But in contrast David says three times over, "*I will sing*". *I will sing, I will sing, I will sing! They may prowl and growl and howl all they want, but not me. I'm going to sing of Jehovah, my Savior, I will sing praise to You. You are my fortress, my loving God.* That's what he could say in the midst of one of the most stressful, difficult times in David's life.

There's a messianic group of psalms, as we noted earlier in the "types". We know Psalm 23 – it's so famous. But what about the one before and the one after? They all have to do with the shepherd, in different ways.

Psalm 22 describes the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. It's a messianic, predictive psalm about how Jesus will die on the cross giving His life for the sheep. The suffering Savior.

Psalm 23, the famous one, is about the Great Shepherd, who looks after his flock, who cares for us, who takes us beside the clear waters and feeds us and refreshes us. The Living Shepherd.

And then Psalm 24, again the shepherd theme but this time focussing on the Chief Shepherd, the exalted Shepherd who brings crowns of reward when he comes back for his own. The Exalted Sovereign.

And then one last psalm, or set of psalms, to mention just to get you started, or whet your appetite for the Psalms. In the NT when you read about the Last Supper which Jesus had with the disciples, there's a phrase at the end of that story that says,

*“And they sang a hymn and then they went out.”* They went out, of course, to the Garden of Gethsemane. Do you know what hymn they sang? It’s not a mystery; we know what hymn they sang that night in the upper room, because it was very much a part of the Passover ceremony: to sing or recite what is called the Hallel.

This refers to Psalms 113 to 118 – the set of psalms the Jews always use at Passover and at the Feast of Tabernacles. And when Jesus celebrated the Passover feast at that last supper with the disciples, in-between the courses of that meal, they stopped and recited part of the Hallel. They would eat a little more and then sing another part of the Hallel.

I would encourage you to take a look at these psalms, especially Psalm 118, and realize that was the song they sang just before Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane and to the cross. Can you imagine singing that particular psalm just before you know that’s what is going to happen to you? It puts a whole new meaning and wonder into what God did for us through the cross of Jesus.

#### **4. Psalms: Guidance and Prayer**

Many people are concerned about God’s guidance, young people in particular, but not just young people. We live in a day and age in which modern urban cultures especially focus so much on the “how to’s” and the most popular books in bookstores, Christian or secular, are very often “How to...” How to do this, how to do that. We love the how-to approach so we can grab it and say here’s the formula: step 1, step 2, step 3, etc.

What we would like to find is a book that says, *“How to find God’s guidance in 5 easy steps”*. Just plug in the formula and you got it! It just pours out the other end. Well, it isn’t like that, as you probably already know. There are no formulas for guidance in the Bible. The Bible tells us very little about any kind of formula in that sense. There isn’t one.

But the Bible does tell us a lot about how to maintain a relationship with God. And out of that relationship with God, the better we get to know Him the better we will know what He wants us to do. It isn’t going to be a + b = c kind of guidance formula. That does

not exist. What does exist is the possibility of knowing God so well that what He wants for us becomes clear to us.

The sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggested a distinction between magic and religion. *“Magic, he said, is when we manipulate the deities so that they perform our wishes; religion is when we subject ourselves to the will of the deities.”* That’s a sociological definition, not a Christian definition, you understand. Philip Yancey, who quoted Malinowski, added, *“True guidance cannot resemble magic, a way for God to give us short cuts and genie bottles. It must...occur in the context of a committed relationship between a Christian and his God... Once that relationship exists, divine guidance becomes not an end in itself but merely one more means God uses in nourishing faith.”*

We often want to find God’s guidance as kind of an end, as the solution, as the answer to the big questions we have. *“What does God want me to do?”* or *“Where does He want me to work?”* or *“Who does He want me to marry?”* And we’re looking for an end product, an easy answer.

God’s guidance is not an end product; it’s a by-product that comes out of relationship. And the Book of Psalms is probably one of the best sections of the Word of God to help us in knowing what God wants us to do because this book helps us deepen that relationship, out of which will come the by-product of knowing what He wants for us.

One final word. Eugene Peterson wrote: *“Why are so many lives prayerless? Simply because ‘the well is deep and you have nothing to draw with.’ (as the Samaritan woman said to Jesus) We need a bucket...a vessel suited to lowering desires and demands into the deep Jacob’s Well of God’s presence and word and bringing them to the surface again. The Psalms are such a bucket.”* So, grab that bucket and lower it into God’s well! Make it a habit.

The book of Proverbs is the focus of our next session. Join me again for that great guide to practical living.

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