

An introduction to the Psalms and Hebrew Poetry

Summary: The Book of Psalms contains the collected prayers and songs of the Jewish people written from the time of Moses to the return from their exile in Babylon. These songs and prayers reflect universal human experiences, they teach us how to pray by their example, and they ultimately point us to the answer to those prayers in Jesus Christ.

Notes:

THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

- The Psalms are presented to us in five books, the number five corresponding to the five books of the law (Genesis to Deuteronomy). God speaks to us through the five books of the law, and we speak to him through the five books of the Psalms.
- Books 1 & 2 (1-72) are largely psalms of David (72:20). David experienced both victories (military, leadership, integrity, and known as a man after God's own heart) and tragedies (the violent death of his best friend and two sons, the deaths of two infant sons, betrayal by advisors and his own son, illness, life as a fugitive, sibling rivalry, a broken marriage, failure as a parent, and sexual sin). He is a type of "everyman" that we can all identify with in many ways.
- Book 3 (73-89) wrestles with God's apparent abandonment of the nation during the Jewish exile in Babylon in 586 BC. Where was God and what about his promises? Can he be trusted?
- Book 4 (90-106) answers the questions of Book 3 with a resounding "The LORD reigns"
- Book 5 (107-150) expresses thanksgiving for the salvation of God in all of its aspects. It includes many festival songs used in Israel's gathered worship.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW POETRY

- Parallelism: correspondence between two or more lines of poetry. This has the effect of slowing us down and encouraging reflection, aiding with memory, and making Hebrew poetry more easily translated into other languages.
- Figurative Language: the use of metaphor and symbolic language to promote reflection and increase understanding
- Chiasm: an ABBA or ABCBA pattern in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order, creating focus on the central idea by framing it

6 PERSPECTIVES WHEN READING THE PSALMS

- Author
- Theology
- Editor
- Jesus
- New Testament
- Application

Psalms 1 & 2: The Benevolent Reign of God

¹Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
²but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.
³He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
 that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
⁴The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 1: Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. According to Psalm 1, what does it mean to be blessed by God?
2. What does verse 1 suggest about the influence that others can have on our faith and practice? Is this verse advocating separation from non-believers?
3. In verse 2, what does the phrase “the law of the LORD” refer to?
4. What does it mean to “meditate on the law of the LORD”? In what way is it like chewing on something?
5. The primary metaphor of Psalm 1 is a tree planted by streams of water. How do the characteristics of a tree correspond to a “blessed” life?
6. In what ways does chaff represent the opposite of those characteristics?
7. On the scale from chaff to mature tree, where would you place yourself? What actions can you take to grow? How can your community help you in that growth?
8. What does it mean to be “known” by the LORD (vs. 6)?

Actions on Earth: The kings of the earth speak (1-3)

¹Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
²The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
³“Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”

[Acts 4:25-26]

Actions in Heaven: God speaks (4-6)

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
⁵Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
⁶“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

Actions in Heaven: The Anointed One speaks (7-9)

⁷I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.”

[Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5]

⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”

[Revelation 2:26; 12:5; 19:15]

Actions on Earth: Kings be warned (10-12)

¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
¹¹Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.
¹²Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 2: Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do verses 1-3 reveal about human nature? What are the “chains” and “fetters” they wish to discard?
2. What does God’s response in verses 4-6 reveal about his nature?
3. Who is God’s son in verse 7? In what sense has God “begotten” him?
4. The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah of Psalm 2. How did the early church understand the implications of Psalm 2? (Acts 4:23-31)
5. In the psalmist’s mind who are the nations and the ends of the earth? In what sense does Jesus fulfill verses 8-9?
6. What does it mean to serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling?
7. How does one “kiss the son”?
8. How do the messages of Psalms 1 and 2 relate to one another?