

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 38

Psalms – Part 2

Forms

We live in an era of classifications. Since the advent of the scientific age, scholars have worked to classify most every aspect of life. Organisms are classified by species and genus. Food groups are vegetables, dairy, grains, and meats. We have the cosmos classified by galaxies and solar systems.

There is something that helps us understand the nature of things when we can categorize them and place them in their appropriate bucket. At my law firm, we have divided people into teams and classified the type of law each does. There is the “Issues and Appeals” team that handles the legal briefing and book analysis. We have the general tort team that works on basic litigation (car wrecks, *etc.*). Our business litigation teams handle commercial disputes. We have a pharmaceutical team that works on drug cases, *etc.*

If you look on the desktop of my computer, then you will find folders where I place files based upon my classification system. There are work files and files for class. I have a set of personal files where I hold matters that pertain to my family. Open up my mailbox program and you will find many files where I store emails based upon subject matter or sender. In both my mailbox and on my desktop, I have “catch all” folders for those files or emails that do not seem to fit into any category.

It is the same principle lived out in our home daily. My wonderful wife is an organization wizard – a place for everything, and everything in its place! Yet even in our house, there are some things that really do not fit into any designated place. These belong in the “catch all” area, a/k/a the “junk drawer.” (Of course with Becky, the junk drawer is divided in sections to further define the spaces for the things that merit no space!)

It is not surprising to find out that some scholars have worked to classify the Psalms into various types. These divisions are wonderful means to help understand how Psalms are put together, how they function and were used, and how we should interpret and apply them today. The only catch is that a system of classifications is never able to really hold all the Psalms. Scholars might try to wedge all Psalms into predetermined categories, but ultimately, like my computer and the house, there are some that belong in a catchall bin, not really fitting into any of the designated classifications. In this Psalm’s class, we will study the Psalms by category, looking to see what insight we can glean.

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PSALM CATEGORIES

There are a number of ways to categorize the Psalms. Before the time of Christ, keepers of the Hebrew scriptures affixed titles to a number of Psalms that “classify” the Psalms. Psalms 120-134 bear the title “*A Song of Ascents.*” Different scholars have urged different interpretations of this label, some thinking it meant songs that were sung as a part of the pilgrimage “up” to Jerusalem.¹ Rabbis writing over a century after the destruction of the temple taught that these 15 psalms were sung on the 15 steps of the temple on the first day of Succoth, the pilgrimage Feast of Booths.² There are countless other deviations on the meaning of this “category.”³

There are other Psalm titles that associate certain Psalms with individuals. There are Psalms that are labeled, “*A Psalm of the Sons of Korah*” and “*A Psalm of Asaph.*” The Korah Psalms are 42, 44-49,⁴ 84-85, and 87-88. The Asaph Psalms are 50, and 73-83. Scholars are not convinced of what significance lies behind the placement of these Psalms or the titles. While there is no clear identity in the Psalms of either Korah or Asaph, there are other Old Testament passages that give some idea of identity. 1 Chronicles 16:5 indicates that Asaph was designated by David as the chief Levite for thanking and praising God before the ark of the covenant. Several hundred years later under King Hezekiah, we read of the “sons of Asaph” as part of the force cleansing the “house of the LORD” (2 Chron. 29:13). Even later, under King Josiah, we read of the “sons of Asaph” as singers that were placed by command of David, Asaph, and others (2 Chron. 35:14). Korah is less fully identified, although one can fairly distinguish the Korah that was Moses’ contemporary and who instigated a rebellion against God. More likely the Korah is the clan progenitor referenced in 1 Chronicles 26:1 as a family of gatekeepers

¹ Hunter, Alister, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, (T&T Clark 2008), at 20.

² Sometime after the temple was destroyed (likely around 220AD), the teachings of rabbis concerning the Temple and Jewish law were recorded in the “*Mishna.*” One section of this writing included a description of the Temple. In the *Middoth* section (a/k/a “tractate”), Part 2.5 it reads, “and fifteen steps led up from it to the Court of Israel, corresponding to the fifteen [songs of] ascents mentioned in the book of psalms. Upon these the Levites stood singing the songs. They were not rectangular but rounded like the arc of a threshing floor.”

³ See the recitations of Keet, C. C., *A Study of the Psalms of Ascent*, (Mitre Press 1969), at 1-17.

⁴ Good arguments can be made that Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 were originally one Psalm. They have a consistent theme with a repeated chorus. In Hebrew, they display an acrostic form with each verse using a consecutive letter of the alphabet. The two together cover the entire alphabet. If they are in fact two parts of the same Psalm divided later, then arguably the entire section of Psalms from 42-49 are Korah Psalms.

(along with the “sons of Asaph”). 2 Chronicles 20:19 also indicates a group of Levites leading in praise to God with King Jehoshaphat were “of the Kohathites.”

A large number of Psalms are categorized as “*A Psalm of David*,” frequently with some other identifier like “*when he fled from Absalom his son*” (Psalm 3). These Psalms are numerous and are scattered throughout the book of Psalms. Scholars do not generally assign these Psalms to David as the author. The Hebrew phrasing used could mean that David was the source of the Psalm as the author or as the inspiration. In other words, certain Psalms may have been written, either inspired by David or dedicated to David.

Psalm titles also occasionally contain technical terms. Psalm 5 indicates the Psalm was to be sung with flutes (“*To the choirmaster: for the flutes*”). Psalm 6 and 12 have the title that instructs the choirmaster to sing with “*stringed instruments according to the Sheminith*.” *Sheminith* comes from the Hebrew word for “eight,” and scholars generally assume it is a reference to an octave. Psalms 8, 81, and 84 are to be sung “*according to The Gittith*.” The “*gittith*” is an unclear Hebrew term that is likely some kind of instrument.⁵

While some scholars group Psalms in these natural and relatively ancient categories, the last 85 years have seen scholars take a different approach to categorizing the Psalms. These categories are based on the perceived form and function of the Psalms. In the 1930’s, German theologian Hermann Gunkel published on the Psalms setting out several different genres of Psalms. Gunkel wrote of:

Hymns,
Psalms of enthronement of Yahweh,
Royal Psalms,
Community complaint Psalms,
Individual complaint Psalms, and
Individual thanksgiving Psalms.⁶

Scholars have built careers around adjusting or changing the categories or genres set forth by Gunkel. They have added and taken away categories including, wisdom, confidence, laments (individual and communal), imprecatory, enthronement, messianic, and more. I would suggest that these efforts never meet full agreement because there is some element of hindsight being read into the

⁵ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M., & Stamm, J. J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 1999).

⁶ See Gunkel, Hermann, *Introduction to the Psalms*, transl. James Nogalski (Mercer University Press 1998)

Psalms. In other words, these genres were not some clear, well-defined categories that existed in Biblical times where someone said, “I think I will write an individual complaint Psalm!” and then go get a form book to show how to write one. Consider in this vein what David Fleming has written,

Clear-cut categorization is not possible for every psalm, nor does every psalm fit a particular category.... A reader of the Psalms will find that different psalms can be grouped by similarities of form, content, and pattern. Yet, variations do occur, and each psalm is unique in both message and content.⁷

Yet it is still reasonable to assume, that a psalm writer would use the conventions and patterns/approaches of others in writing their own psalms.

The usage of such forms, other than satisfying mankind’s insatiable desire to put things in buckets, come from the unfolding interpretations that come from understanding a context of writing. Because scholars are constantly challenging and adjusting the categories, we will go back in time and use the genres of Gunkel and consider several Psalms in more depth. We are choosing hallmark Psalms that are considered solid exemplars and representatives of other similar Psalms.

PSALM 13 **AN “INDIVIDUAL COMPLAINT” PSALM**

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

²How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

³Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

⁴lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”

lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

⁵But I have trusted in your steadfast love;

⁷ This is not our pastor David Fleming, but David M. Fleming, writer of the article “Book of Psalms,” Butler, Trent, ed., *Holman Bible Dictionary*, (Holman 1991), at 1149.

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
6I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

This Psalm has a later affixed title labeling it as a Psalm of David. As mentioned before, this does not mean that David wrote the Psalm. It *might* mean that, but it could as easily mean that the song was *about* David or written in memory of David, or even inspired by David.

As a lament, this Psalm has three of the typically seen elements: (1) A complaint to God (v. 1-2); (2) a cry for help (v. 3-4); and (3) an affirmation of confidence (v. 5-6). We will break it into those sections as we analyze it, but we need to note the flow from one element to the next. The psalmist starts in deep despair, feeling abandoned by God. The despair moves him to pray for God’s relief. The Psalmist then is able to close in peaceful confidence that God will not truly forsake him. This Psalm contrasts the feelings of abandonment with the knowledge of God’s faithful answers to prayer.

(1) A Complaint to God

If we were translating this in Hebrew class, then we would quickly learn the Hebrew idiom *ad-anah* :

עַד־אַנְהָ

This phrase means, “How long?” More than a simple glance at a watch, it is a cry of frustration. It is the complaint, “Still??? Won’t this EVER end?” The phrase is used four times in the first two verses of this Psalm. *Ad-anah* – Lord, are you going to forget me forever? *Ad-anah* – How long are you going to hide your face? *Ad-anah* – how long must I try to figure out what to do on my own? *Ad-anah* – how long is my enemy going to end up on top? Each additional cry of *ad-anah* brings greater volume and intensity to the feelings of the Psalmist.

He feels God has “forgotten” him. With the Hebrew idea here, it is not a primitive concern that God has memory lapses or is a bit absentminded. The Psalmist is concerned that God has deliberately neglected or ignored him. God has chosen to overlook the Psalmist’s pain. This is conveyed clearly in the parallel statement to God forgetting, that of God “hiding his face.” This seems a choice of God, not the result of a poor memory or overworked God! The Psalmist is wondering if God is angry or perhaps indifferent!

It has left the Psalmist in the dead end of his own ideas. It is a struggle with one’s own thoughts and answers (“how long must I take counsel in my soul”). It is a

heavy heart in deep emotional distress (“must I...have sorrow in my heart all the day?”)

(2) A Cry for Help

This deep feeling of abandonment and loneliness, moves the faithful Psalmist to a prayer for God’s intervention. Verse four begins with the Hebrew word translated “Consider...” It is the verb *nbt* and it means, “to look,” “gaze,” or “see.” This is the counterpart to the Psalmist’s earlier feeling that God has overlooked or forgotten him. He calls upon God to look, not overlook! His cry, “Consider and answer me” is conveyed in our English phrasing, “Look and help me!” or “Pay attention and help!” The Psalmist may feel abandoned, but he knows that God is able to bring him “light” to his “eyes.” “Bright eyes” were a reflection of good spirits and health. In 1 Samuel 14:27, after a hard battle and with a ravenous appetite, Jonathan ate some honey “and his eyes became bright.” His spirits were lifted! Ezra used the same expression when speaking of the relief God brought his people in Ezra 9:8.

The Psalmist prays for God to boost his spirits, lest he die, lest his enemies win, and lest his enemies gloat! This prayer is the movement of the Psalmist to seek what he knows to be true (God can and will act) as against what he fears and feels (that God has abandoned him. From here, the Psalmist moves to praise.

(3) An Affirmation of Confidence

The flow of this Psalm has moved from despair, to prayer, and ends with the praise of trust. The Psalmist does not end this lament with the victory over his enemies. He does not say, “Thank you God, you have rescued me from the pit!” In this Psalm, he is only able to give the praise of faith. He affirms:

I have trusted in your steadfast love.

He knows that he has relied upon God. His confidence is in God, and with this he can affirm:

My heart shall rejoice in your salvation!

Here, the word “rejoice” is taken from verse four and given a better resting place. The Psalmist contrasts the rejoicing his enemies would do in the event God fails to help him with the rejoicing he will do once God brings salvation. Here, the faithful Psalmist closes his lament with the assurance of the future:

I *will* sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The Psalmist know what he does not feel! He feels despair, but he knows of God’s faithfulness. He feels alone but he knows of God’s bounty. He feels

rejected but he knows God's steadfast love. He may not yet see the victory, but he trusts it will come.

Point For Home

Who has not felt abandoned by God? Who has not questioned whether God has turned his back because of our own shortcomings or failures? Who has not felt unlovable, even by the loving God? The Bible constantly encourages us, both in this Psalm and in many other places, to recognize the need to sometimes let our heads trump our hearts! When we feel dejected and rejected, we need to remember the faithful promise of a God who does not lie. "I will never leave you nor forsake you," the writer of Hebrews proclaims. With this in mind, Hebrews continues:

So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6).

There comes a time when we are all called to live by faith, not by sight. We are called to circumstances that require trust, not good feelings. But this is all part of God's transforming work to make of us what we need to be! In other words, not fun, but necessary!

PSALM 113 A "HYMN"

Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD!
²Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore!
³From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the LORD is to be praised!

⁴The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!
⁵Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
⁶who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
⁷He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

⁸to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
⁹He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the LORD!

As a hymn, this Psalm impels the reader or listener to worship and praise God. It is one of several consecutive Psalms that for a group known by a Hebrew word, “*hallel*.” *Hallel* is the Hebrew word for “praise,” and it is found many times in this and other “praise” Psalms or hymns. Together with Psalms 114-118, this group is known as the “Egyptian Hallel Psalms” because Psalm 114 mentions Israel’s exodus from Egypt and settlement in Judah and Israel. These were Psalms ritually sung during the celebration of the Passover.

These psalms were used at the great annual festivals; Psalms 113–114 were sung before the meal, during the family celebration of Passover, and Psalms 115–118 were sung after the meal ⁸

Psalm 113 follows Gunkel’s “form” of a hymn song in its structure as it (1) Calls to praise (v. 1-3); (2) Gives reasons for praise (v. 4-9) and then; (3) Concludes in praise (v. 9). As we break apart the hymn, we see beautiful poetry that not only extols the virtues of God, but personalizes his greatness to the worshipper. We can consider these “sections” as we analyze this Psalm.

(1) Call to Praise

We English speakers use the first two Hebrew words in Psalm 113 frequently in our own vocabulary, especially in our worship songs. The Hebrew reads:

הללו יה

While we have not learned all the vowel markings in this class, we have learned each Hebrew letter. The Hebrew reads, “*hal-lu yah*.” Of course, one can readily see the English “hallelujah” as a straight out rendition of the Hebrew. The Hebrew word *hal-lu* is the imperative form of the Hebrew for “Praise.” It is “praise” with an exclamation mark! “*Yah*” is an abbreviated form of Yahweh. So, we have here at the beginning of Psalms 113 an instruction or command for the people to ascribe praise and worship to Yahweh God. This is what scholars call a “hortatory” use of the imperative. By that they mean that they mean that the

⁸ Bratcher, R. G., & Reyrburn, W. D., *A translator's handbook on the book of Psalms*, (United Bible Societies 1991), at 964.

“command” is not a decree from on high, but rather an exhortation or encouragement to do something. We might think of it as one saying to another, “Let us praise the Lord!”

This call to praise is repeated in several phrasings, good examples of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry. In verse one alone, the added parallel phrasing tells the “servants of the LORD” to praise him. They are told to praise his “name.” In verse two, his “name” is to be “blessed,” which becomes an alternate word for “praise.” The second and third verses then place the call to praise God into a chronologic and geographic phrasing. The name of the LORD is to be blessed or praised, from this time forth and forevermore.” In other words, the blessing is not temporary, not limited to “worship times” nor to times where things are going well (or poorly). The Hebrew phrasing “from the rising of the sun to its setting” gives a geographic reference. The sun, of course, rises in the east and sets in the west. This phrasing means that from east to west and all points in between, God is to be praised.⁹

The praise to be offered is repeatedly keyed to the LORD and to his “name.” The name of the LORD was given to Moses as the LORD was intervening in Israel’s slavery in Egypt. It was a holy name never to be taken in vain. It was a reflection of God and his character. It was a name of mighty involvement and victory. It was the name that set the true God apart from the idols and conventions of men.

(2) Reasons for Praise

The reasons to praise God evolve around “who” God is and “what” God does. God is “high above all nations.” The parallel line adds that “his glory is above the heavens.” The Hebrew has six words, lining up in a parallel structure of three and three. We set these out because they illustrate clear parallelism and also because of the emphasis more readily seen in the Hebrew:

High	over-all-nations	Yahweh
Above	the-heavens	his-glory

By placing “High” and “above” first in each phrase, the words are emphatic. It is “real high” and “far above.” Yahweh is not simply real high over the nations, but over the heavens as well. He reigns not only over people but all of creation.

⁹ Some take the phrasing to be another time reference, meaning from morning to night. We defer from this interpretation as the Psalmist has just said that God is to be praised for all time, not simply daylight. Further, the very next phrase continues the geographic thought as God is described as high “above all nations.”

“Yahweh” is synonymous with his “glory.” “The Hebrew for “glory” speaks of God’s authority and power, as well as his reputation.¹⁰

We can see the call to praise God because he is the Supreme Deity; he is the one who has power and authority over all people and all things. It brings forth the rhetorical question: “Who is like the LORD our God?” This question precedes one of the most touching parts of this Psalm. There were pagan peoples who believed in powerful gods. Humans are social creatures who live in societies with powerful people. We are all familiar with holders of power. The real question becomes, “what does the powerful do with his or her power?” In this sense, the Psalmist brings home the greatness of God.

The Psalmist draws a strong image that is a little lost in the ESV translation of the Psalm. As the ESV notes in verse five, God is “seated on high.” God is not only high and far above all nations and creation, but he *sits* there. He is enthroned. He reigns. Yet, the Hebrew then offers a phrasing that is a contrasting parallel to God sitting. In the Hebrew, we read that God then “stoops” or “bends down.” God comes from on high and gets low to raise the helpless.

The image runs through the Hebrew word choice God is on “high,” “far above,” where he reigns and “sits,” yet he “comes low” and “stoops down” to then “raise up” those who are in the lowest places of society and the world. He raises the poor from the dirt and the needy from the ash heap, or garbage dump where they would be searching for salvageable food or belongings. God places these on high sitting as princes. In words reminiscent of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, God brings children to the barren woman. This is the reason to praise God! He has the power and he uses it for good!

This cannot be overstated, especially in our generation. We live in an intellectual age. We have figured out how God makes the sun rise and set (the rotation of the earth). We understand why the heavens open their storehouses of snow (condensation freezing and riding gravity to earth). We understand the genetic structure behind breeding and offspring. We can make computers that calculate beyond human comprehension. We have logical development of philosophical arguments that pose conundrums forcing previously unknown levels of debate and consideration. We have archaeological findings that bring new understandings to old scriptures, sometimes seeming to challenge long held beliefs as illuminate the Bible’s cultural settings. Sometimes there is a strong pull to see things as too great for our biblical understandings of God. I have heard some say,

¹⁰ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M., & Stamm, J. J., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Brill 1999).

“I believe in God. There is more likely than not a deity of sorts. But what he really is, and what he really does is not something I am ready to say. The Bible gives one idea, but there are many others. What is the ultimate truth, I cannot say.”

This Psalm, and indeed all of Scripture, shout in opposition to such an idea. While we can marvel at the many things we now understand, we should see that the Psalmist was serious about putting God not only over everything, but *high over everything*. He is far removed, and yet – and this is the key to Scripture—he stoops down and involves himself in the life of even the simplest and lowest human. He does so on an intimate and personal level. He takes the one in need, and he addresses those needs.

The Bible explains that the God who is real, is a God who is involved in the day to day lives of his creation. All nations, all people, all times – God relates to us.

(3) Concluding Praise

With that the Psalmist closes with the words that started the Psalm, the instruction to “Praise the LORD!”

Point For Home

Immediately before his crucifixion, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. We know that the celebration including the singing of hymns (Mark 14:26), and Hebrew tradition was to sing the Egyptian Hallel Psalms, including Psalm 113. Jesus would have sung of the greatness of Yahweh God who would stoop down from the heavens to raise up the poorest downcast of the world. This idea was getting its greatest demonstration in the very deed Jesus was about to bring to completion. Paul would write later of Christ as one who “was in the form of God...but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant and being made in the likeness of men.” Jesus stooped even further as he was in human form and then “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” But this was not done by accident or for no real purpose. Christ did this to raise the sinner to sit with him on high! I suspect this Psalm gave Christ encouragement in purpose and resolve as he sang it in full anticipation of how the next few hours user in his death. May we join the ages and Praise our God!

CONCLUSION

What makes the Psalms different? Why do we study them? Friend of the class and life-long preacher Ken Dye is fond of saying that “the Psalms are distinct writings that let you see the writers from the inside out...their emotions, their temperament, their heart. They write as we feel.”¹¹ Regardless of where one is in his or her life, it is always possible to find a Psalm that seems to express the inner state of mind and heart of the reader. No doubt this is one reason we see the Psalms as the most popular usage book in the New Testament times, in the early church, and in the Middle Ages. Even today, a new reader to the Psalms is frequently stunned to see how many of our church songs come from these verses.

One of the frustrations of an Old Testament survey class is the inability to drill down deeply into certain subjects that offer great rewards to those who probe their depths. Without a doubt, that is nowhere more evident than in lessons on the Psalms. In an effort to identify types of Psalms, scholars have made some wonderful insights into the usages of these Psalms by communities on Old Testament times, in the days of Jesus, and in the early church. Beyond that, the historical church has made use of the Psalter as a means of worship as well as personal expression before the Lord. Yet we are unable to reach into much depth on this because of the limitations of the structure of this class.

Interested readers are urged to consider taking some resources on the Psalms and reading for further study. Attached to the “Want more?” section are some books well worth reading for more insight and perspectives. This gives those interested a chance to probe the Psalms that seem “right” as well as those that leave us wondering where they come from! (Like those Psalms that pray for God to bring the most horrible things upon the Psalmist’s enemies.”)

WANT MORE?

Go to your nearest theological library and consider reading books on the Psalms. Email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com and let us hear about your interactions with the Psalms!

¹¹ Ken Dye in personal correspondence commenting on this lesson July 30, 2011.