

USING THE PSALMS (1)

Reading the Psalms

A. Introduction

1. No other book of the Bible has had a richer history in the life of the church than the book of Psalms.

The Lord Jesus we know sang the Psalms, prayed the Psalms, quoted the Psalms and said that the Psalms are about Him.

The first followers of Jesus, as Jews, would have prayed and sung the Psalms and known them by heart.

For majority of the history of the church, the Psalms have been read, preached, sung, memorised, and prayed by God's people.

Yet that is not true today.

Apart from a few famous Psalms and a few famous verses from the Psalms, we no longer use or are as familiar with them, as Christ's followers once were.

One reason for this, is that we don't know how to use them or to use them well.

2. My purpose for this series is to help us to use this book again.

By reading the Psalms.

By praying the Psalms.

By singing the Psalms.

By living the Psalms.

3. Herman Selderhuis wrote the following in his book, Calvin's Theology of the Psalms:

"...for Calvin the book of the Psalms assumed greater and greater significance in his theological development. In the first edition of the Institutes (1536) the Psalter is the least quoted biblical book, in the last edition it is quoted more than any other with the one exception of the epistle to the Romans."

Commenting on this, someone has written, *"Is it fair to conclude that a sign of growing Christian maturity is a deeper appreciation for God's songbook?"*

4. We're going to start by looking at how we read the Psalms.

Why?

Because knowing how to read the Psalms will help us to be able to pray, and to sing, and to live the Psalms.

B. Read the Psalms as a Book

1. The book of Psalms is found in the Writings section of the Old Testament.

The purpose of the Writings sections was to give hope to the remnant of Israel after the exile was over that a King like David (the Messiah or Christ) was coming, and to teach them how to live faithfully as they waited.

And this is what the book of Psalms does.

Whilst the individual psalms were written over a period of about 1000 years, once the exile was over, the Psalms were collected together (possibly by Ezra) and put into the book as we find it today.

2. The book of Psalms is divided into five books and each book ends with a closing statement of praise to God.

Book 1 contains Psalm 1 to 41.

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen."
(Psalm 41:13)

Book 2 contains Psalm 42 to 72.

"Praise be to the LORD GOD, the God of Israel, who alone does marvellous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name for ever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen."
(Psalm 72:18-19)

Book 3 contains Psalm 73 to 89.

"Praise be to the LORD for ever! Amen and Amen." (Psalm 89:52)

Book 4 contains Psalm 90 to 106.

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD." (Psalm 106:48)

Book 5 contains Psalm 107 to 150.

"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." (Psalm 150:6)

The most obvious reason for the division into five books is in order to mirror the five books of the Law of Moses.

It is also likely that the opening psalms (1-2) and the closing psalms (146-150) are intended to provide an introduction and conclusion to the book.

3. In the introduction, the people of Israel (the assembly of the righteous) are told how to read the Psalms.

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:1-2)

The law of the LORD, I think in Psalm 1, is the book of Psalms, which has been structured to reflect the Law.

Psalm 1 tells them to join the Christ they are waiting for (who is the blessed man) in meditating on the law of LORD day and night, by singing the Psalms that follow.

Psalm 2 then tells them, who they will be singing of or about, as they sing the Psalms with the Christ.

"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." (Psalm 2:6)

"He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." (Psalm 2:7-8)

"Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:12)

As they sing with the Christ, they are waiting for, through the five books of Psalms, they will be singing of or about the Christ they are waiting for.

4. After singing with the Christ, the book of Psalms, and meditating on the Christ as they sing, the conclusion to the Psalms, then tells the people what their response should now be.

"Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul." (Psalm 146:1)

"Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praise to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!" (Psalm 147:1)

"Praise the LORD." (Psalm 148:1)

"Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints." (Psalm 149:1)

"Praise the LORD... Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD." (Psalm 150:1, 6)

It should cause them to sing to the Christ they are waiting for in praise.

5. For the people of Israel after the exile, as they sang the Psalms, they sang with the Christ they were waiting for, they sang of the Christ they were waiting for, and they sang to the Christ they were waiting for.

As they did, not only were their minds informed about who the Christ was and their hearts were reassured that the Christ would come (God would keep the promise He made to David in 2 Samuel 7), they were also taught how to live as they waited for Him to arrive.

6. For us today, now that the Christ they were waiting for has come in Jesus, how do we read the Psalms?

We read (sing) them with Jesus, because these are His words, and His voice leads us in singing every line.

As we read them with Jesus, we read (sing) about Jesus, because every individual Psalm, book within the Psalms, and the book as a whole is about Him.

This informs our mind about who Jesus is and what He has done.

This reassures our hearts that God does keep all His promises.

It teaches us how to live Christ-like lives.

But most of all, by reading the Psalms with Jesus that are about Jesus, it should cause us to sing to Jesus in gratitude for what He has done and the blessings we have if we have taken refuge in Him.

7. Therefore, when we read the Psalms, we read this book in two ways.

Firstly, we read it as a book that describes the Christ.

Secondly, and only after we've read it as a book that describes the Christ, do we read as a book that describes the Christian, because apart from Christ we cannot sing these songs.

D. Read the Psalms as a Book that describes the Christ

1. Whilst it is true that each individual Psalm describes the Christ, it is important to see that the book of Psalms as whole describes the Christ too.

As we sing the Psalms from start to finish, and meditate on the law of the LORD as we do, we see how each of the five books found within the Psalms speak of the Christ.

2. Book 1 tells us in the opening Psalms that the Christ will be a righteous and royal man.

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers." (Psalm 1:1)

"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron sceptre; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." (Psalm 2:8-9)

Book 1 also tells us that the Christ will be a man who suffers, but that His suffering will lead to victory.

"O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" (Psalm 3:1)

"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever." (Psalm 23:6)

Initially it seems that David is the Christ being spoken of – the titles of these Psalms tell us that they were spoken by him.

"The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD; I have not done evil by turning from my God. All his laws are before me; I have not turned away from his decrees. I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin. The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight." (Psalm 18:20-24)

But as you get towards the end of Book 1 it becomes clear that although David is like the Christ, he is not the Christ.

"But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools. I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this. Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand. You rebuke and discipline men for their sin; you consume their wealth like a moth – each man is but a breath." (Psalm 39:7-11)

The picture we are given is that the Christ is a righteous and royal man, who will suffer but ultimately be victorious. Whilst David is like Him, he is not Him.

Who then will it be? We move on to Book 2.

2. In Book 2 it becomes even clearer that David is not the Christ.

His prayer of confession in Psalm 51 reminds us that he was an adulterer and murderer.

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." (Psalm 51:3-4)

His prayer in Psalm 71 reminds us of his weakness.

"Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." (Psalm 71:9)

And the Psalms in between find David almost anywhere but in Jerusalem (the Christ's city). Instead he is on the run, in a cave, in captivity, and in the desert.

The Christ is not David. It will be his son as 2 Samuel 7 makes clear.

But which son? The focus turns to Solomon and the expectation that he could be the Christ is seen in Psalm 45 and 72.

Psalm 45 is probably a psalm written for Solomon's wedding. Psalm 72 is a prayer of David for his son to be the Christ which he could never be (the title 'Of Solomon' is more likely 'for Solomon').

"A sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness." (Psalm 45:6-7)

"Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted one with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor." (Psalm 72:1-4)

"Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies; let the nations fall beneath your feet." (Psalm 45:5)

"He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him." (Psalm 72:8, 11)

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever." (Psalm 45:6)

"He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations... May his name endure for ever, may it continue as long as the sun." (Psalm 72:5, 17)

The picture of the Christ we are given is of David's son being a righteous ruler, who will bring justice and reign over all the nations for ever and ever. He is both the hope of Israel and of the nations.

3. Yet all the optimism of Book 2 is gone when you get into Book 3.

It turns out that neither Solomon, or any of the other kings of Israel, is the Christ.

In fact, it looks like there won't be a Christ at all, as there is no longer a king reigning in Israel, let alone one who fits all the requirements to be the Christ they were waiting for.

God's people are in exile. Jerusalem is in ruins and the temple is no more.

"Turn your steps towards these everlasting ruins, all this destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary... They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling-place of your Name." (Psalm 74:3, 7)

The reason for the exile is clear. The people have not been obedient to the Law of Moses.

"But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices." (Psalm 81:11-12)

The overall tone of this book is one of despair – Why? How long?

Has God forgotten His promise? The answer to this question will come in Book 4. But Book 3 does end with a glimmer of hope for the people.

There are songs about the temple (Psalm 84), the land (Psalm 85), the king (Psalm 86 is a prayer of David), and the city which will include Gentiles (Psalm 87). All things that were lost with the exile.

Book 3 tells us that David's sons are not the Christ because they have the same problem David had of being unable to be completely obedient to God. Yet with the return of a Davidic psalm and the mention of the land, city, and temple, there is hint that the exile won't last forever.

4. Book 4 is a wonderful answer to the despair of Book 3 as it is all about reassuring Israel that God will keep His promise and that the Christ will come.

The opening psalm, 90, a psalm of Moses; the closing three psalms (104-106) are to remind them that God's commitment to keep His promise has always been based on His faithfulness and not theirs.

God in the past has forgiven Israel for their disobedience and delivered them, so surely it possible that this could happen again.

In between these psalms at either end of the book, we have a series of psalms that emphasise that God is the Almighty King, and so He is able to keep His promise.

Also, with this assurance that the Christ will come, we find once more, Davidic psalms (101 and 103). Psalm 101 present to us a king whose desire is to live a righteous life. Psalm 103 focus is on God's love and forgiveness. Again we are being pointed to what the Christ will be like and what He will do.

5. Finally, we come to Book 5, and it contains song after song praising the God who will save His people.

Salvation is spoken of in a number of different ways.

"Let the redeemed of the LORD say this – those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south." (Psalm 107:2)

"He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people. He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children." (Psalm 113:7-9)

"When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue." (Psalm 114:1)

"For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living." (Psalm 116:8-9)

"I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death." (Psalm 118:17-18)

"He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins." (Psalm 130:8)

"He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous." (Psalm 146:7-8)

The people of Israel living at the time the book of Psalms was composed had not experienced this salvation yet, but such was their confidence now, that the Christ is coming and when He did, they would.

It is no surprise then that He is centre stage, with a number of Davidic psalms once more.

"The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The LORD will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies... The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." (Psalm 110:1-2, 4)

"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118:22-24)

The Word of God would sustain them as they waited for the Christ to come (Psalm 119).

It is fitting that this is book and the whole book of Psalms ends with song after song of praise to God, because when the salvation of the Christ is complete, that is what God's people will be doing for all eternity.

"And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:10)

D. Read the Psalms as a Book that describes the Christian

1. The book of Psalms describes the blessings that come to the Christian who has taken refuge in the Christ.

2. The book of Psalms describes the experiences of life that come to the Christian who has taken refuge in the Christ.

As we gaze on the Christ as we see Him in the Psalms, we will become more like Him. He life becomes our life.

But not only do these songs, tell us the kind of life we should live, the different kinds of songs speak to us of the kind of life we will experience too (one of praise, lament, thankfulness, trust, remembrance, obedience, repentance, desire for justice).