

THE BIG READ (40)

Jesus in the Psalms

A. Introduction

1. Every book of the Bible has one dominating theme – Jesus is the Christ.

“Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”
(Luke 24:45-47)

Jesus is the Christ who will suffer and die.

Jesus is the Christ who will rise from the dead on the third day.

Jesus is the Christ who will forgive the sins of all who repent.

Jesus is the Christ who will be preached to the nations.

2. The Old Testament that Jesus read contained the same 39 books as our English Bibles but was arranged in a different order.

It had three sections – the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

“Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44)

The Law (of Moses) contains the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Of the Prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, gives us God’s perspective on the history of Israel from the conquest of the Promised Land until their exile from it, and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Book of the Twelve, explains why the history of Israel turned out the way it did.

The final section of the Old Testament is the Writings.

Whereas the Prophets looked back to what happened to Israel and why it happened in order to call the nation to repent and return to God, the Writings looked forward to the hope that was coming to those who repent, through a King like David, and showed those who did, how to live faithfully in all of life’s circumstances as they waited for His arrival.

This means that though the books found in the Writings sections were written at different points in Israel’s history, it was after the Babylonian exile was over, that they were collected together to give the remnant hope and guidance as they waited.

The oldest list of books in the Hebrew Bible (Baba Bathra 14b-15a) places the books that make up the Writings in the following order: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles.

Ruth is an excellent introduction to the Psalms, which is all about the ‘David’ (the Christ) who is coming.

B. Getting Started with the Psalms

1. The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible.

It contains more chapters than any other book of the Bible, as well as both the longest and shortest chapters in the Bible.

The Hebrew title for this book is *Tehillim*, which means “Praises”.

The name Psalms, comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and derived from a word meaning “to pluck a stringed instrument”.

The book of Psalms is therefore a book of songs.

2. Who wrote these songs?

The predominant author of these songs is King David.

David was Israel's singer of songs.

"These are the last words of David: "The oracle of David son of Jesse, the oracles of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel's singer of songs." (2 Samuel 23:1)

Of the psalms whose authors we can identify, only two psalms were written by someone other than David or the Levites (Heman, Asaph, Jeduthum, the sons of Korah, Ethan) who were under the King's authority.

Psalms 90 is a prayer of Moses the man of God.

Psalms 127 is song of Solomon.

Fifty psalms are untitled and are known as 'orphan' psalms. These were written by many people over many years.

As well as giving us the name of the author who wrote the psalm, some of the titles give a historical setting, a musical arrangement for the song, or how it was used in the religious calendar.

In total the book of Psalms took nearly a thousand years (from Moses to post-exile) to write.

3. What types of songs are there?

Hymns – songs that praise God for who He is, and what He has done, is doing and will do; especially for His mighty acts of creation and redemption.

"I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no-one can fathom." (Psalm 145:1-3)

Laments – songs that cry out over personal or community suffering (war or defeat, persecution, famine, plague, loss), and appeal to God to intervene; they are full of sorrow, distress and feelings of abandonment.

"Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?... Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless." (Psalm 10:1, 12)

Psalms of thanksgiving – songs that express gratitude to God for answers to prayers or laments.

"Praise be to the LORD, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." (Psalm 124:6-8)

Psalms of confidence – songs that express confidence in God to care for and guide His people.

"My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall never be shaken." (Psalm 62:1-2)

Psalms of remembrance – songs that recall God's great acts in the past in order to build confidence in the present.

"To him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, His love endures for ever. And brought Israel out from among them, His love endures for ever. With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; His love endures for ever." (Psalm 136:10-12)

Wisdom psalms – songs that instruct us about how to live under God's rule in this fallen world.

"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)

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

"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)

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

The reason for this division into five books is to mirror or parallel the five books of the Law of Moses.

"As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel, the Book of Psalms entitled Blessed is the man, the Book entitled For the Leader: Maskil, the Book, A Psalm of Asaph, the Book, A Prayer of Moses, and the Book, Let the redeemed of the LORD say." (Jewish Midrash)

2. A helpful way to see a structure of this book is by seeing the opening psalms (1-2) and concluding psalms (146-150) as what the people of Israel after the exile and up until the coming of Christ are doing as they sing these psalms.

Psalm 1: They sing with the Christ they are waiting for

Psalm 2: They sing of the Christ they are waiting for

Psalm 146-150: They sing to the Christ they are waiting for

But this raises the question – "Who is this Christ they are waiting for?" – and the answer comes by singing and meditating on the five books that make up the Psalms.

In addition to this, as well as telling the remnant singing the psalms what the Christ they are waiting for is like, the whole book serves to reassure them, that He will come.

God will keep the promise He made to David in 2 Samuel 7.

3. So the way the book of Psalms works, I think, is that as the people sing with the Christ, they sing of the Christ, and this causes them to sing to Christ, they are waiting for.

In Psalm 1, the blessed man is the one whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

"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, the people are to meditate on, I think is the book of Psalms, which have been put together to reflect the Law.

As they meditate on the Law/Psalms (as part of the assembly of the righteous), they are doing this with the Christ.

"When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel." (Deuteronomy 17:18-20)

Yet as they meditate on the Law/Psalms, they sing of the Christ, because that is who the Psalms are about.

Each individual Psalm, each book of the Psalms, and the whole story of the Psalms, tells them about the Christ that they are waiting for.

And this in turn causes them to sing to the Christ in praise.

D. Jesus in the Psalms

1. We sing with Jesus with the Psalms.

The book of Psalms was His hymnbook.

We hear Him praise His Father as He sings the hymns of praise.

We hear Him mourn the impact of sin as He sings the laments.

We hear Him thank His Father for His care as He sings the psalms of thanksgiving.

We hear His trust in His Father as He sings the psalms of confidence.

We hear Him recall God's great acts in the past as He sings the psalms of remembrance.

We hear Him express His desire to obey His Father as He sings the wisdom psalms.

We hear Him own the sins of His people to lead them in repentance as He sings the psalms of repentance.

We hear Him cry out for justice as He sings the imprecatory psalms.

We hear Him sing of the work He came to do as He sing the royal and messianic psalms.

In the book of Psalms we have the words of Christ to sing with Him, and we hear His voice leading us in every line.

2. We sing of Jesus with the Psalms.

The portrait of the Christ we are given in the book of Psalms has two sides to it.

One side is of an all-conquering King.

"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." (Psalm 110:1-2)

The other is of a suffering Servant.

"The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me." (Psalm 18:4-5)

The Psalms point us to Jesus whose path to glory was the road of suffering.

"Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26)

3. We sing to Jesus with the Psalms.

Jesus is the God who deserves to be praised – He is our Creator and our Redeemer.

Jesus is the King who rules over all.

Jesus is the Saviour who hears our cries.

Jesus is the Lord who demands our obedience.

Jesus is the helper who rewards our trust in Him.

Jesus is the Judge who enforces His covenant.

In the Psalms, Jesus is not just the supreme worshipper of God, but also the supreme One we should worship.