How To Study The Bible (#18)
Understanding Psalms

Chapter Eleven - The Psalms:
Israel’s Prayers And Ours

Introduction
1. The difficulty in interpreting Psalms is due
specifically to what they are.
2. As we do with other literary genres we assume
that because they are God’s word they contain a
message from God to us. But much of Psalms is
actually words spoken to or about God ... and that
this kind of scripture is just as much a part of the
revelation as the first kind.
3. Psalms are basically prayers and hymns addressed
to God, or about God in song.
4. How do these words spoken to God function as
God’s word to us? They are not propositions,
imperatives or narratives that function primarily as
didactic/moral instruction.
5. Yet, they are profitable for/to us when we realize
their divinely intended purposes.
6. They help us express ourselves to God and
consider his ways.
7. One of the most popular psalms, the 23rd, conveys
God’s loving care and our dependence on him via
the symbolism of a shepherd and his sheep. But
not every psalm yields such obvious meaning at
first.
8. Some psalms (cf. 88) are negative, expressing the
misery of the writer. Some are primarily historical,
others Messianic, oriented toward wisdom,
focused on the glory of Israel’s kings, and some
seem to wish for the destruction of enemies. How
are all of these motives to be understood?

Some Preliminary Exegetical Observations

Psalms constitute a distinct kind of literature and
must be read and interpreted with special care. We
must understand their nature, their various types, as
well as their forms and functions.
1. The Psalms As Poetry - as we read and interpret
the psalms we must remember that they are
musical poems.
   a. Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was
      addressed to the mind through the heart (i.e.,
      much of the language is intentionally
      emotive.)
iii. And thus a level of appreciation for the message of each Psalm. (see exegetical examples below)

c. Each type of psalm was intended to have a given function in the life of Israel. Some were intended to be sung in celebration of Israel’s king, for example.

d. There are also various patterns within the psalms.

i. Arrangements, repetition of words/sounds, stylistic plays on words, etc., are found throughout.

ii. Psalm 119, for example, is an extended acrostic using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet as headings in each of its respective octets that lists the benefits of learning and obeying God’s law.

e. Each psalm has its own integrity as a literary unit.

i. They must be treated as wholes, not as single verses or thoughts as in Proverbs. Don’t decontextualize. [Proverbs must also be considered as whole re its teaching about specific truths.-jla]

ii. Every psalm has a specific pattern of development through which its ideas are presented, developed, etc., leading to a conclusion.

iii. Each verse within the psalm must be understood within the context of the psalm itself, and not just as an independent thought. The entirety of the psalm provides the framework of meaning for interpreting/understanding its parts. (cf. Ps 51:16, 19 and the complete context of the psalm)

The Types Of Psalms

The psalms are divided into seven different (sometimes overlapping) categories. (cf. 212ff for refs)

1. Laments

a. The largest group of psalms, more than 60

b. Some are individual, some are corporate

c. Individual laments express/assume deep trust in God, help a person to express struggles (of varying kinds)

d. Corporate laments do the same thing for, obviously, a larger group of people.

e. The laments in Psalms express a deep, honest fervor felt by God’s people.

2. Thanksgiving Psalms

a. These psalms expressed joy when things to well.

b. They render thanks to God for his faithfulness, protection, benefit, etc.

c. There are six community/corporate thanksgiving psalms and ten individual ones.

3. Hymns of Praise

a. These psalms, some joy and some misery centered, focus on praising God for his greatness.

b. God, regardless of the vantage point of the one offering praise, deserves praise.

4. Salvation-History Psalms

a. These psalms review the history of God’s saving works for Israel.

b. They focus especially on his deliverance of the nation from Egypt and his creation of Israel as his own special people.

5. Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation

a. Some are covenant renewal liturgies designed to lead Israel to renew their devotion for God to the level of Sinai commitment.

b. Some are Davidic covenant psalms, which focus on praising God for choosing the seed line from David to the Messiah (ultimately).
c. Some are royal psalms and deal specifically with kingship, including royal lament, royal thanksgiving, etc. Kingship in Israel was a divine blessing because it depicted God’s concern for Israel and provided stability and protection under his guidance.

d. Some are enthronement psalms, dedicated to the installation of a new king in the nation. Some see them as Messianic.

e. Some are Songs of Zion, the city of Jerusalem. They focus on the role of Jerusalem as the divinely decreed center of worship to Jehovah, the presence of God’s temple, etc.

6. Wisdom Psalms - Eight psalms (even Proverbs 8) fit in this category of psalms that praise the value of wisdom and the wise life.

7. Songs of Trust - These ten psalms focus on our need to trust in God regardless of what we are going through in life.

An Exegetical Sampling

1. Psalm 3: A Lament
   a. Address
      i. The psalmist identifies the one to whom the psalm/prayer is directed, God.
      ii. Ps 3:1 - The cry “Lord” shows this. It is repeated in verse 7.
   b. Complaint.
      i. The psalmist identifies and explains and complains about his trouble and why he needs God’s help.
      ii. Ps 3:1-2. David describes his enemies and how bad things are.
   c. Trust.
      i. The psalmist expresses trust in God, which serves as the foundation for his complaint. The psalmist assumes that God is able to help him as he (God) sees fit.
      ii. Ps. 3:3-6 shows who God is, how he answers prayer, how he keeps his people secure when things appear hopeless, etc. This all shows God to be trustworthy.
   d. Deliverance.
      i. The psalmist cries out for deliverance from his situation.
      ii. Ps 3:7 specifically calls for deliverance. (Note - the request for help follows immediately after an expression of trust.)
   e. Assurance.
      i. The psalmist expresses assurance that God will deliver (cf., trust above).
   ii. Ps 3:7 (“Strike all my ...”) shows assurance. (Note metaphorical description of God’s victory.)

f. Praise.
   i. The psalmist offers praise for God’s blessings in his life.
   ii. Ps 3:8 praises God for his faithfulness.

g. Lessons learned:
   i. The importance of balanced prayer
   ii. Requests should be balanced by appreciation
   iii. Complaints should be balanced by expressions of confidence
   iv. The psalms is intended as a guide.
   v. The same pattern appears in group laments.

2. Psalm 138: A Thanksgiving Psalm
   a. Introduction.
      i. The psalmist summarizes how God has helped.
      ii. Ps 138:1-2 - David shows that he intends to praise God for his love and faithfulness.
   b. Distress.
      i. God’s deliverance in a given situation is described.
      ii. Ps 138:3 - No specific distress is described in this psalm. It is simply assumed.
   c. Appeal.
      i. The psalmist repeats the appeal made to God.
      ii. Ps 138:3 - God is praised for having responded to David’s appeal.
   d. Deliverance.
      i. God’s deliverance is described.
      ii. Ps 138:6-7 - God paid attention to David, an undeserving supplicant, preserved his life in time of trouble, and rescued him from his enemies.
   e. Testimony.
      i. God is praised for his mercy.
      ii. Ps 138:4-5, 8 - David testifies of God’s goodness. God is so good that even the greatest on earth willingly praise him. He can always be counted on and his love and mercy are endless.

A Special Note On the “Imprecatory Psalms”

1. The psalms as a whole express a wide range of emotions.
2. Some of those emotions, while not inherently sinful, might lead to sin.
3. And some of those emotions might be better verbalized than acted upon.
4. It is in this way that S/F introduce the imprecatory (imprecari - spoken curse) psalms.
5. They demonstrate anger toward others, specific situations, etc., but they do so to/through God rather than the objects of our anger.
6. These psalms are usually found in laments.
7. They often are a cry to God for justice, not just punishment, and appeal to covenant curses (cf., prior chapter.)
8. These pleas are often to be understood in light of eternal justice, not temporal justice.
9. These psalms are often hyperbolic of the same sort of the covenant curses themselves.
10. These psalms do not contradict Jesus’ command to love our enemies. Remember, love does mean to have a warm fuzzy feeling about ... It is always an active element of Jesus’ life, thus it is more what you do than what you feel. Biblical commands are about doing love, not feeling love.
11. The imprecatory psalms, on the other hand, are about feeling anger, not doing anger.
12. Note: The term “hate” in the Psalms does not always mean “despise.” It also means to “be unwilling or unable to put up with” or to “reject.” (cf., God toward Esau in Mal 1:3; Ps 139:22).

Some Concluding Hermeneutical Observations
How do we understand the words spoken to God (as in Psalms) as they function for us as a word from God? They must be viewed as opportunities to speak to God in words he inspired others to speak (or a record via inspiration that they spoke - ?- jla).
1. Three Basic Benefits of The Psalms
   a. The psalms can serve as a guide to worship.
      i. Those who worship God can use the psalms as a formal means of expressing their own thoughts and feelings, or as a guide to do so.
      ii. They can help us express our concerns when we lack skills to find the proper words.
   b. The psalms demonstrate to us how we can relate honestly to God (re joy, disappointment, anger, etc.)
      i. Though they do not always give specific doctrinal instruction ...
      ii. The psalms provide examples of godly articulation of our strongest feelings.
   c. The psalms demonstrate the importance of reflection and mediation on things that God has done for us.
      i. The psalms invite us to pray.
      ii. They invite us to controlled thinking about God’s word.
      iii. They invites us to reflective fellowship with others.
      iv. They help shape our lives in purity and charity.
      v. Unlike any other literature, they lift us to a position where we can commune with God.
      vi. They capture a sense of greatness of God’s kingdom.
      vii. They help us grasp a sense of what being with God through eternity will be like.
      viii. They show us that regardless of what happens in life, God will always be with us.
      ix. There is always a reason to wait for the Lord’s deliverance.
      x. To cry out to God for help is not a challenge to his faithfulness but a declaration of it.
2. A Caution
   a. The psalms, like the rest of scripture, never guarantee a pleasant life.
   b. To claim that they do so is to be guilty of over-literalization.
   c. God never promised a life of no worry, ultimate happiness, etc., in this existence.
   d. David’s life, for example, was filled with deep tragedy, yet his laments and praises and thanksgivings show how much his faith was centered in God.
   e. God deserves to be praised for his greatness even in the midst of our misery.
   f. Some view life as follows: “Life is a swirling, sucking, eddy of despair, punctuated by brief moments of false hope, in an ever-darkening universe.”
   g. But, as Ecclesiastes, “it is enough” ... That is to say that God’s glimmers of hope in this seemingly, cruel, dark world are enough to cause/prompt us to be faithful to him no matter what. Psalms, in its own way, echoes that sentiment.