

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

(Spring Seminar given at the Milwaukee Bible College)

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The Book of Psalms constitutes the greatest piece of literature ever written. It is superb and supreme, not only from its literary structure and its prophetic instruction, but also from its spiritual inspiration. Its structures and literary forms are masterpieces which only God could have written through the instrumentality of holy men motivated by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to know the Psalms in all their beauty and blessing is to produce intellectual enjoyment and experiential satisfaction.

THE NAME given to the Psalms by the Jews is the title Tehillim (plural of Tehillah) and means “To make a jubilant sound”. Only one Psalm bears this title, Ps. 145. Our English word “Psalms” is a transliteration of the Greek title of the Septuagint, namely “Psalmoi” which means “Songs”. The word “Psalter” is from the Greek Psalterion, meaning “a harp, or other stringed instrument”. Tehillim has therefore a wide meaning, and includes all that is worthy of praise or celebration, especially the works and ways of Jehovah.

The Dispensational aspect should at the outset be taken into consideration. While they are written for us, they are not written to us or about us. Hence the direct interpretation and applications are to the Messiah as Israel’s King, and to Israel His earthly people, and not to Christ as Head of the Body, the Church, nor to members of that church. The Psalms are Messianic and Millennial in character. The special truths not found in the Psalms are: Christ, as Head of the Body, the Church (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18); Salvation by grace thru faith, and not of works (Eph. 2:8-9). The revelation of the Mystery (Eph. 3:1-6); Blessings with Christ in the Heavens (Eph. 1:3); and Identification with Christ in His Death, Burial, and Resurrection (Rom. 6:3-6; Col. 2:12-13).

These one hundred and fifty Sacred Songs were the hymns of the Hebrews. In them they expressed their deepest desires, their soul’s supplications and satisfactions. Historical facts are more or less cold in their presentation and reception; while Literature is emotional and warm in its character. This is true in the language and literature of any people, but more so in the literature of the Hebrews, because their history was a redemptive history. Therefore, their songs were redemptive in character.

The Age of the Psalms – No other book of the Bible embraces so many years in the time of its composition. The Book of Genesis sweeps over 2500 years of human history, 2000 in its first eleven chapters; but the composition of the book itself did not occupy so many years. The Psalms began with the 90th – “A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God” and sang themselves down thru the years of Israel’s checkered history until the band of returned exiles, with mingled feelings of mourning and rejoicing, lifted their voices in the 85th Psalm as they laid the foundation of the Second Temple nearly eleven hundred years later. The Psalms embrace the earliest and the latest in Hebrews sacred literature.

Interpretation of the Psalms can be along three lines: Historical, Prophetical, and Devotional.

In the Historical, the time, author, and circumstances should be discovered. See Ps. 3 with 2 Samuel Chapters 15-18.

In the Prophetical one must see that history does not fully exhaust the meaning. There must be a search for the prophetic meaning. See Psalms 2, 16, 22, 40 and 72.

In the Devotional one must see the spiritual application. The Psalms contain praise and prayer, spiritual exercises that help us in our spiritual struggle and victory. John Calvin called the Psalms: "The Anatomy of the Soul". In this Book we have Morning Psalms, 3, 4, 5; Evening Psalms, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; Pilgrim Psalms; 84, 122; Prayer Psalms, 17, 84; Praise Psalms 106, 111; Penitential Psalms, 32,51; and Meditation Psalms, 56,60.

I. CONSTRUCTION OF THE PSALMS

In the A.V. of our English Bible the Psalms are arranged just as the chapters in the other books are arranged. Even the form of each Psalm is the same as any other chapter, that is, it is printed as prose.

But in the R.V. we notice a striking change. In the first place the Psalm is printed in the form of poetry instead of prose. We miss the rhythm of sound that our ears are accustomed to, but a little observation will disclose a rhythm of thought which is characteristic of Hebrew poetry. There are many varieties of this just as there are many varieties of versification in our English poetry.

1. As To The Time Element

Not all of the Psalms tell us when, and under what circumstances they were written, and even some of those that do are seriously challenged as to their truthfulness by the destructive critics. However, the following is suggested as a help to the understanding of the circumstances under which the Psalms were written.

a. Pre-Davidic Psalms

During the Wilderness Wandering, Ps. 90. "Moses, the man of God."

b. Davidic Psalms

Before David became king. When he was being persecuted by Saul: See 1 Sam. 17 to 31; Psalms 11, 13, 14, 53, 59, 56, 34, 37, 142, 17, 52, 109, 35, 140, 120, 64, 31, 54, 19, 57, 58, 63, 86, 131, 141.

After David became king and before his great sin: See 2 Sam. 1-10; 1 Chron. 18-19. His accession to the throne: Psalms 139, 138, 15, 26, 27, 101. The removal of the ark, Psalms 68, 133, 24, 132, 105, 106, 95, 96, 65, 100. The covenant promised by Nathan, Pss. 2, 45, 22, 16, 118, 110. During his wars and conquests, Pss. 9, 10, 108, 21, 144, 60.

David's fall and repentance: See 2 Sam. 11 & 12. Psalms 6, 130, 51, 32, 33, 38, 39, 40, 41, 103, 104.

The time of Absalom’s rebellion: See 2 Sam. 15 to 18. Pss. 3, 4, 5, 7, 42, 43, 55 (Ahithophel’s treachery) 61, 62, 70, 71, 69, 36, 143.

The close of David’s life. See 2 Sam. 22 to 24: Pss. 18, 8, 25, 30 (Araunah’s thrashing floor dedicated) 91, 145.

c. Post-Davidic Psalms

Before the Captivity – On Solomon’s accession, 1 Chron. 29; Ps. 72. On Solomon’s marriage, 1 Kgs. 3, 9; Ps. 45. On Solomon’s building the temple and his own house, 1 Kings 6, 7; 2 Chron. 3, 4; Ps. 127. On Solomon’s death – Heman’s lament, 2 Chron.9:31; Ps. 88. On Rehoboam’s defeat by Shishak, 2 Chron. 12; Ps. 89. On Jehoshaphat’s reforms, 2 Chron. 19; Ps. 82. On Jehoshaphat’s deliverance from the allies – Moab and Ammon, 2 Chron. 20; Psalms 46, 47, 48, 83. On Hezekiah’s deliverance and the Assyrian invasion, and the overthrow of Sennacherib, 2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32; Ps. 80, 75, 76, 87. On the Chaldean invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and during the captivity, 2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 34; Jer. 52; Pss. 74, 79, 44, 50, 73, 78, 81, 102, 137.

After the Captivity – On the occasion of the return from Babylon, Ezra 1; Pss. 85, 107, 93, 94, 123, 126, (87, 92). On the occasion of the opposition to the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra 3, 4; Pss. 49, 66, 67, 124, 125, 128, 129. On the occasion of the rebuilding of the second temple and the resumption of the temple services, Ezra 5,6; Pss. 84, 97, 98, 99 then “the Hallel” i.e. Hallelujah – 111 to 118 inclusive, “the Great Hallel” – 134, 135, 136. Other songs of the temple, used also in the daily morning service in the synagogue – Pss. 146-150. Psalms supposed to have been written by Ezra, Pss. 1, 119.

2. As To The Titles Used

a. Relating to Authorship

The Psalter contains 150 separate Psalms written mostly during the period from David to Hezekiah, with some earlier and some later. Of these 150 Psalms, one-hundred bear titles of authors, as follows:

<i>NAMES</i>	<i>Book I 1 - 41</i>	<i>Book II 42 - 72</i>	<i>Book III 73 - 89</i>	<i>Book IV 90 - 106</i>	<i>Book V 107- 150</i>	<i>Total</i>
David	37	18	1	2	15	73
Asaph	--	1	11	--	--	12
Korah	--	7	3	--	--	10
Moses	--	--	--	1	--	1
Solomon	--	1	-	--	1	2
Ethan	--	--	1	--	--	1
Heman	--	--	1	--	--	1
Anonymous	4	4	--	14	28	50
<i>Totals</i>	41	31	17	17	44	150

This table reveals that Books I and II are David, Book III is Asaphic, Books IV & V are Anonymous.

b. Relating to the Superscriptions

No subject of Biblical study has appeared to be more incapable of solution than the placement and meaning of the Psalm titles. This seems to be the universal testimony of all who have written on the subject.

The practice of prefixing titles to poems is common among the oriental nations. These titles are present in most of the MSS. What seemed to be such an apparent lack of connection of so many titles with their respective Psalms, led destructive critics to discard them in most cases, if not altogether.

The long-lost key to these titles was at last discovered by Dr. James W. Thirtle, an English Hebrew scholar, who at the turn of the present century brought forth his discovery in a book, The Titles Of The Psalms.

In the original Hebrew Bible there is no break between the Psalms, no not even so much as a space between lines, or between the Psalms. This being so, one can easily see what was thought to be a superscription of one Psalm might well be the subscription of the foregoing Psalm.

Dr. Thirtle made his discovery on a Psalm which stands absolutely alone, without any Psalms before or following. It was the Psalm in Habakkuk Ch. 3. In this Psalm he discovered three parts, not two:

- V. 1 – The Superscription, or Title Proper – “A Prayer of Habakkuk the Prophet Upon Shigionoth.”
- Vs. 2-19 – The Psalm Proper
- V. 19 – The Subscription – “To the Chief Musician upon Neginoth.”

3. As To The Truth Presented

These 150 Psalms are naturally divided into five books of varied number of Psalms. Each Book ends with a doxology, a fitting end to the Book. See the endings to Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106 and 150.

As Moses gave Israel the five books of the Law, so David gave them the five books of Psalms. In the former we have the facts of Hebrew history; in the latter the feelings expressed in Poetry.

Dr. Gaebelein says: “So clear is this correspondence that the old Rabbis called the Psalms: ‘The Pentateuch of David’”.

Dr. Pierson says: “The Pentateuch of Psalms is seen not only in the five books in which the one hundred and fifty are arranged, but in the close correspondence with the Mosaic Pentateuch”.

BOOK #	PSALMS	CORRESPONDS TO	KEY
I	Psalms 1 to 41	Genesis	“Man and the Son of Man” “Man of Sin”
II	Psalms 42 to 72	Exodus	“Israel as a nation”
III	Psalms 73 to 89	Leviticus	“The Sanctuary”
IV	Psalms 90 to 106	Numbers	Israel and the nations of the earth
V	Psalms 107 to 150	Deuteronomy	God and his Word. Prophetic prospect.

Dr. Pierson says again: “The resemblances are not fanciful; the studious and devout Hebrew found long ago in Psalm 1 the reference to the Tree of Life in Eden. In Psalm 42 the oppression of their fathers in Egypt; in Psalm 73 the despair of the alien and the privilege of drawing near to Jehovah; in Psalm 90 the disastrous story of the wilderness wandering and generations of graves; and in Psalm 107 the approach of the Promised Land.”

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PSALMS

A. Hebrew Poetry

The Psalter by no means contains all the Hebrew Poetry to be found in the Bible. There are Psalms in several of the Books of the Old Testament, for example, Exodus 15, Deut. 31, Judges 5, 2 Sam. 22, Habakkuk 3. Many of the Books are themselves poetical in thought and form – for example, Job, Canticles, Isaiah 40-66, and this thought and form flow over into the New Testament and supply the basis for the earliest Christian Hymns, especially in Luke.

B. Parallelistic in Form

These Psalms which are lyrical in character are in the form of parallelism. Hebrew poetry follows the device not of rhyme but of rhythm. To understand this is of the greatest importance for a true appreciation and interpretation of the Psalms and also of other poetry in the Bible.

If the significance of a Psalm must be gathered from its scope, and if its scope is largely determined by its structure, obviously the first thing to do in our study of a Psalm is to discover its structure, which is its literary form. Unfortunately the arrangement of verses in our Bibles does not preserve the parallelisms of thought, and so not a little of the significance is lost. An able attempt to show in English the parallelism of the Hebrew is found in Rotherham’s Studies in the Psalms. The first serious attempt to expound the subject of parallelism was made in the eighteenth century by Bishop Lowth in his epoch-making work on Hebrew Poetry, De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum.

In this work he distinguishes three forms of parallelism, and to these others have been added by Jebb, Driver, Briggs, McCurdy, Terry, Gray, Duhm, Budde, and Sievers. Kraft made an excellent study of the strophic structure.

1. Synonymous Parallelism – In which the same thing is repeated in different words; in which the second member enforces the thought of the first.

Example:

The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof
The world, and they that dwell therein.

For He hath founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the floods.

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?
Or who shall stand in His holy Place?

Psalm 24:1-3

2. Antithetic Parallelism – In which the thought of the first line is emphasized by a contrasted thought in the second.

Example:

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish. Psalm 1:6
For evil doers shall be cut off;
But those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth. Psalm 37:9

3. Synthetic Parallelism – In which the second member explains or adds something to the first.

Example:

The Law of the Lord is perfect,
Converting the soul:

The testimony of the Lord is sure,
Making wise the simple:

The statutes of the Lord are right,
Rejoicing the heart:

The commandments of the Lord are pure,
Enlightening the eyes:

The fear of the lord is clean,
Enduring forever:

The judgments of the Lord are true,
And righteous altogether. Psalm 19:7-9

4. Introverted Parallelism – In which the members are placed in inverse order.

Example:

A. As for me, I will come into Thy house;

B. In the multitude of Thy mercy;

B. And in Thy fear;

A. Will I worship towards Thy holy temple. Psalm 5:7

5. Iterative Parallelism – In which the thought is simply repeated.

Example:

The floods have lifted up, O Lord,
The floods have lifted up their voice:
The floods lift up their waves. Psalm 93:3

6. Responsory Parallelism – In which the members are antiphonal, appeal and answer alternating.

Example:

O Israel, trust thou in the Lord:
He is their help and their shield.

O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord,
He is their help and their shield.

Ye that fear the Lord, trust in the Lord:
He is their help and their shield.

Psalm 115:9-11

7. Climacteric Parallelism – In which the second line completes the first.

Example:

Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty,
Give unto the Lord glory and strength.

Psalm 29:1

8. Alternate Parallelism – In which the members follow one another by turns, in which there are passages of intervening pairs.

Example:

A. Iniquities prevail against me;

B. As for our transgressions, Thou shalt purge them away.

A. Blessed is the man whom Thou choosest,
and causest to approach unto Thee, That he may dwell in Thy courts;

B. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Thy house,
even of Thy holy temple.

Psalm 65:3-4

In these verses singular and plural alternate; the individual and the many as is seen.

There are also combinations of these forms, which, in instances make the structure very elaborate. This method is employed in whole Psalms.

A. – 1,2 Prayers and Plea

B. – 3 Promise (of prayer, private)

C. – 4,5 Negative (claims)

C. – 6 Positive (claims)

B. – 7 Promise (of worship, public)

A. – 8-12 Prayers and Plea

Psalm 5

Arrangements of this kind characterize the whole Psalter, and, indeed many parts of the Old Testament. This is fully displayed, as it relates to the Psalms, in a Key to the Psalms, by the Rev. Thomas Boys, M.A.

9. Alphabetic Acrostic – There are examples of this outside of the Psalter, the whole of the Lamentations conforming to this arrangement. Within the Psalter there are nine alphabetical poems, viz. 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; and 145. In these, verses or groups of verses, begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The most elaborate of these is Psalm 119, which has twenty-two sections of eight verses each, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet occurring eight times in succession, as the initial letter of the verses in its section. The words in our Bible at the top of these sections are the names of the Hebrew letters.

C. The Imaginative Element

There is a difference between imagination and fancy. Fancy is usually occupied with trivial things, but imagination with important things; the objects of the latter are real, but of the former unreal. Fancy is busy with dreams, hallucinations, unreality, often the result of a disordered state of mind; but the imagination acts when the intellectual powers are in full play.

In his monumental work on Figures of Speech, Dr. E.W. Bullinger explains and illustrates over two hundred varieties which are employed in the Scriptures. This is sufficient to show that the subject is of immense importance, and that without some understanding of it sober interpretation must often be given up as hopeless.

1. ALLEGORY

Here there is description of one thing under the image of another. A good example is Psalm 80:8-16, where Israel is spoken of as a vine (See Jotham's Allegory in Judg. Ch. 9).

2. METAPHOR

Here there is comparison by representation. A figure of speech founded on resemblance, by which a word is transformed from one subject, to which it properly belongs, to another in such a manner that a comparison is implied, though not formally expressed (Ps. 84:11).

“The Lord God is a sun and shield.” What is meant is that the Lord is His people's illumination and protection.

3. SIMILE

Here there is comparison by resemblance. The likening together of two things which, however, different in other respects, have some strong point or points of resemblance (Psalm 1:3,4):

“He shall be like a tree.
The ungodly ... are like the chaff.”

4. METONYMY

A figure by which one word is put for another on account of some actual relation between the things signified (Psalm 128:2):

“Thou shalt eat the labor of thine hands.”
What is meant here is the thing which the labor of the hands has produced.

5. SYNECDOCHE

A figure by which the whole of a thing is put for a part, or a part for a whole (Psalm 52:4):

“Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue.”
Here “tongue” stands for the man who wickedly uses it.

6. HYPERBOLE

This is the figure of exaggeration, when more is said than is literally meant (Psalm 6:6-7):

“I water my couch with my tears.
Mine eye is consumed because of grief;
It waxeth old because of all mine enemies.”

7. PERSONIFICATION

A figure by which intelligence is attributed by words or actions, to inanimate objects, or abstract ideas (Psalm 35:10):

“All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like unto Thee.”
Here are two ideas: First, “bones” is put for the whole person (Synecdoche) and then, the “bones” are represented as speaking.

8. APOSTROPHE

So called when inanimate things are addressed (Psalm 114:5).
“What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest?
Thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back.”

In addition to these, there is what is called “the local coloring of the Psalms”. Psalm 58:4-10 is a good illustration of this. Within the compass of these few verses we have presented to us in rapid succession the images of the serpent in its natural and artificial state, a lion fight, running water, the arrow missing fire, the snail with its track of slime, the abortion, the desert camp, with its preparation of the evening meal, the fire, the sudden storm, the joy of victory, the advance of the army over the corpses of the slain.

III. CONTENTS OF THE PSALMS

The Psalms touch upon every phase of Israel’s national, physical, and spiritual life. Some of the subjects are:

1. PATRIOTISM – Pss. 33, 68, 74, 87, 144.
2. PENITENCE – Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 88, 130, 143.
3. PETITION – Pss. 4, 13, 17, 25, 28, 54, 55, 56, 61, 86, 141.

4. PILGRIMAGE – Pss. 120, 124.
5. PRAISE – Pss. 9, 18, 30, 40, 47, 66, 75, 92, 95, 100, 107, 118, 136, 146, 150.
6. PRECEPT – Pss. 1, 12, 19, 119
7. PROVIDENCE – Pss. 18, 25, 31, 104, 127, 128, 147.
8. PROPHECY
 - a. Messiah’s Triumph & Kingdom – Pss. 2, 9, 72, 89, 93, 132, 145 (See Acts 4:25; 13:53; Heb. 1:5; 5:5; Rev. 2:26-27; Rev. 12:5).
 - b. Messiah’s Resurrection – Ps. 16 (See Acts 2:27; 13:35).
 - c. Messiah, the Innocent Sufferer – Pss. 22, 31, 41, 69, (See Matt. 27:35, 39-48).
 - d. Messiah’s Incarnation, Obedience, Sacrifice – Ps. 40 (See Heb. 10:5-10).
 - e. Messiah’s Eternal Throne – Ps. 45 (See Heb. 1:8-9).
 - f. Messiah’s Descent and Ascension – Ps. 68 (See Eph. 4:8).
 - g. Messiah’s Zeal for His Father’s House – Ps. 69 (See John 2:17; Matt. 27:48; Rom. 11:9,10).
 - h. Messiah’s Reign of Peace and Blessedness – Ps. 97.
 - i. Messiah Coming to Judge, Deliver, Reign – Ps. 97.
 - j. Messiah, the Conqueror, and Priest-King – Ps. 110 (See Matt. 22:43; Acts 2:34; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 1:13; 5:6; 7:17).
 - k. Messiah, the Stone Rejected by the Builders – Ps. 118 (See Matt. 21:42; Eph. 2:20).
9. PUNISHMENT (Imprecation) Pss. 109, 137. These are prayers for vengeance. It means “to call down”, “to curse”.

CONCLUSION:

In closing let me give a few quotations on the use of the Psalms as devotional help. Athanasius says: “They seem to me to be a kind of mirror for every one who sings them, in which he may observe the motions of the soul.” Basil says that the Psalter “is a common store-house of good doctrines, providing exactly what is expedient for every one”. Luther says that in the Psalms “the Scriptures are collected into a beautiful manual of wonderful and attractive brevity”. Calvin says: “The Holy Spirit has represented to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, anxieties, in short, all the stormy emotions, by which human minds are wont to be agitated”. Hooker says: “The choice and flower of all things profitable in other books the Psalms do more briefly contain, and more movingly also express by reason of that poetical form wherewith they are written. What is there necessary for man to know which the Psalms are not able to teach?”

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J. W. Thirtle: The Titles of the Psalms. An original work which no student to the Psalms can afford to neglect.

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