

PSALMS: The Worship of an Honest Heart

by Ray C. Stedman

There are 150 psalms in this book, making it the longest book in the Bible. Have you discovered that it is really five books in one? It divides very easily and obviously into five different books, and each of these divisions is closed by a doxology. You will find the first one at the end of Psalm 41, and every other section as well ends with this kind of doxology. Psalm 41 ends:

**Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen. {Psa 41:13 RSV}**

These books were deliberately compiled with a special purpose in view. It has often been pointed out that the book of Psalms is the book of human emotions. Indeed, every experience of man's heart is reflected in this book. No matter what mood you may be in, some psalm will reflect that mood. For this amazing book records every one of man's emotions and experiences. Those who have discovered the "secret of perpetual emotion" certainly ought to get acquainted with the book of Psalms. For instance,

- If you are fearful, read Psalm 56 or Psalm 91 or Psalm 23 (you know that one, of course). And
- If you are discouraged, read Psalm 42 – one example among many.
- If you happen to be feeling lonely, then I would suggest Psalm 71 or Psalm 62.

- If you are oppressed, with a sense of sinfulness, there are two marvelous psalms for you: Psalm 51, written after David's double sin of adultery and murder; and Psalm 32, a great expression of confession and forgiveness. And then,
- If you are worried or anxious, I'd recommend Psalm 37 and Psalm 73.
- If you are angry, try Psalm 58 or Psalm 13.
- If you are resentful, read Psalm 94 or Psalm 77.
- If you are happy and want some words to express your happiness, try Psalm 92 or Psalm 66.
- If you feel forsaken, try Psalm 88.
- If you are grateful and you would like to say it, read Psalm 40.
- If you are doubtful, if your faith is beginning to fail, read Psalm 119.

And we could go on and on, because all 150 psalms have to do with experience.

Most of us think the psalms are David's work. In fact, more than half of them were written by David, the sweet singer of Israel, who was given by God the gift of capturing the emotions of his full life's varied experience and putting them in beautiful lyrical terms. These became the psalm book or

hymn book of Israel. Many of these psalms were written to be sung in public, which is why you will often find at the head of the psalm “To the chief choirmaster” or “To the choirmaster,” and in some of our Bibles is the word “Maskil” which is simply the Hebrew word for “psalm.”

You may be interested to know that one psalm, Psalm 90, was written by Moses, and two were composed by King Solomon. Still others were written by a nameless group called the sons of Korah who were especially charged with leading the singing of Israel. Also, a man named Asaph wrote many of the psalms, and even good King Hezekiah wrote ten of them. As you look into the book of Psalms, you can see that in many cases the titles refer to the author.

Now, the **five books of psalms** that I have already mentioned parallel the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible. Those first five books were designed by God to give us the pattern of God’s working in a human life, or in the whole of creation, or in the whole of world history, and God always follows the same pattern, whether with an individual or with a nation. He takes them through the same steps. And those five steps were revealed by divine inspiration in the first five books of the Bible. The psalms follow the same steps, reflecting the reactions of the human heart to this pattern of God’s working in man’s life.

1. To begin with, the first book of psalms – Psalms 1 through 41 – is equivalent to the book of Genesis and has essentially the same message. It is the cry of human need. It is the expression in beautiful, poetic terms of the human heart’s deepest need. You will find that it follows closely the story of the book of Genesis. It begins in Psalm 1 with the picture of the perfect man just as Genesis begins with man in the Garden of Eden. Then in Psalm 2, you have man in his rebellion. It is a notable psalm, beginning with the words:

**Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and his anointed,
saying,
“Let us burst their bonds asunder.”
{Psa 2:1-3a RSV}**

It describes man in his rebellion, just as Genesis pictures him in the Garden of Eden. In the third psalm we see man in his rejection, and right on through in the following psalms in this first book. Then the grace of God is introduced. Here is the picture of God seeking man out in the darkness – just as he did in the shadows of the Garden, crying out, “Adam, where art thou?” – and moving to restore man to his lost estate. And as you read through this book you will hear the human heart’s expression of deep-seated longing, of its separation from God, its calling out to God in need.

2. The second book of psalms, Psalm 42 through Psalm 72, corresponds to the book of Exodus in the Pentateuch. Here is the experience of a new relationship. Just as Exodus tells us the story of Israel in captivity in Egypt – learning of the sorrow, the bondage, and the slavery of sin, and then learning something of the great grace of God in his power to deliver them, to bring them out of Egypt – the second book of psalms traces the same account, carefully capturing the theme of Exodus. Psalm 45 is the psalm of God the king, concerning God in his sovereign rule over man and man’s experience of God as king. And in Psalm 46 we read the promise of God’s delivering help – that God is a present help in time of trouble. In Psalm 50 the strength of God is exemplified and Psalm 51 reveals the delivering grace of God to man in his sin. And in Psalm 72, the last psalm of this book, God is pictured in his mighty, conquering power, setting man free from the bondage in which sin has enslaved him.
3. The third book of psalms, Psalm 73 through Psalm 89, corresponds to the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is the book of the tabernacle of worship, the discovery of what God is like when man comes before him and what he himself is like in the presence of God. And Leviticus is the book that reveals the inner workings of man’s heart: we see his need, his deep consciousness of his own sin, and the discovery of what God offers to do about it. And in these psalms, 73 through 89, the same pattern is carried out. Psalm 75, for instance, is an ex-

quisite expression of man's awareness of God's judgment in the inner heart. Psalm 78 is a record of God's unbending love: although God loves man, he will never let him get away with anything. He never compromises, he never bends; he gives in to man's plea for mercy, but is absolutely relentless in cutting away sin. Then, when man is ready to acknowledge his sin, and to agree with God's judgment concerning sin, God deals with him in love. Psalm 81 describes the new strength that God offers man, and Psalm 84 wonderfully portrays the continuous provision that God offers us.

4. Psalms 90 through 106 make up the fourth book, paralleling the book of Numbers – the wilderness book – which sets forth the experience of human failure. Throughout this book you will find victory alternating with devastating defeat. Just as in our experience, God steps in and delivers the Israelites in the desert – working mighty miracles and ministering to their needs, feeding them with bread from heaven, opening the rock for them so that water would flow – and then, in the next chapter, Israel murmurs and complains and falls into defeat. This pattern is pictured in the fourth book of psalms.
5. The fifth book, Psalm 107 through Psalm 150, corresponds to the book of Deuteronomy, the experience of the new resource in God. Here these psalms picture the person who has come to the end of himself, and is now ready to lay hold of the fullness of God. And this final book of Psalms is nothing but thanksgiving and praise, from beginning to end. It sounds one triumphant note all the way through and the closing part of it is a constant “Hallelujah, praise the Lord!” It is the expression of someone so excited that all he can do is shout “Hallelujah!” And that is the way the entire book of Psalms closes.

Now that is the experience of man as he learns to understand the pattern of God's work in his life.

It may be of interest to you to know that the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon form a separate section of the Bible. These are **the books of poetry**.

- In Job we read the cry of man's spirit, the deep cry of a man needing faith – needing trust in God – even though everything seems to go wrong, and everything seems inexplicable. When suffering reaches such an intensity that it seems senseless and no longer of any obvious value, then man's only recourse is quiet faith. Man was made to believe in God.
- Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes join together to express the cry of man's soul, and just as the soul has three divisions – the emotions, the mind, and the will – so these books express these divisions.
 - Psalms is the book of emotions.
 - Proverbs is the book of the will. And
 - Ecclesiastes is the book of the mind, the story of Solomon's searching examination of all the philosophies of men and concluding on the basis of human reason what is right and good.

Here then, you have the soul's expression of its need pointing to one great answer – hope. Just as the answer to the cry of the spirit is faith, the answer to the cry of the soul is hope.

- Then in the Song of Solomon you have, essentially, the cry of the body for love. Our deepest need as men and women is love. Children cannot grow up adequately and rightly unless they have love. And this cry of the body is expressed in the most beautiful love poem ever written, the Song of Solomon.

Many have had difficulty getting much out of the psalms. They read through psalms that seem to be filled only with David's cry against his enemies, or that seem to be only a record of handicaps and trials. Many are quite troubled by what are sometimes called the imprecatory psalms, those psalms that speak with bitter and scorching words against enemies, calling God's wrath down upon them, wishing that enemies be torn limb from limb and hung from the nearest lamp post. This disturbs people. “What kind of writing is this?” they say. “This doesn't agree with the New Testament's message that we are to love our enemies!” But I think we can understand even these troubling psalms if we will remember what the New Testa-

ment tells us about the Old Testament, that “these things,” Paul says, “were written down for our instruction,” (1 Cor 10:11). And if we put ourselves in the place of the psalmist, right into his world, we will see that the enemies that he faced then are the same enemies that we face today. The New Testament tells us that “we are not contending against flesh and blood,” (Eph 6:12). Sometimes people are confused about this, thinking that whoever opposes them is their enemy. But people are not our enemies. Rather, the principles of evil, the philosophies of the world, the attitudes of the flesh are our enemies; our real enemies are within us. Jesus said, “not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth,” {Matt 15:11 RSV} ... “for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication,” {Matt 15:19 RSV} and all these other things. There is your enemy. And if you read the psalms with this understanding, whenever you read “enemy” you will think of those temptations toward covetousness or jealousy or pride or ambition within yourself as the enemy that is spoken of in the psalms, and you will see that this severe language makes sense. We must deal severely with these things. They have no right to live in a Christian’s heart, in a Christian’s life. They have no right to be honored.

This is right in line with what the Lord Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away;” {Matt 5:29a RSV}. “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away;” {Matt 5:30a RSV}. Now he doesn’t mean to do that literally; he simply means that we are to deal with temptation absolutely ruthlessly. Don’t entertain these things at all. And so these ruthless psalms are simply a picture of the way we must deal with the real enemies of the heart of man.

Let me give you an example: **Psalm 43** is a very brief psalm and we will look at it together so you can see what I mean. Here is the cry of the psalmist:

**Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!
For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;
why hast thou cast me off?
Why go I mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?
{Psa 43:1-2 RSV}**

Now when you read such a psalm, don’t think of the enemy as being people – the neighbors across the back fence, or your overbearing boss. The enemies are within you. Think of them that way. And when you do, you are treating Scripture as it was intended to be treated. These are instructions for us, as Paul tells us. As you read this psalm, you can see how easily it divides itself:

- The first two verses record an attitude of attack. And who has not felt this way? These things within us, these burning jealousies, these desires to strike back at people and avenge ourselves and get even with them – these are the enemy. Such an attack ought to drive us, like the psalmist, to cry out, “Lord defend my cause against these things. Thou art the God in whom I take refuge.” And if you feel you don’t seem to be getting through to God right away, you can understand what the psalmist means when he says, “Why hast thou cast me off? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?”
- But now move to the second group, the third and fourth verses. There is an appeal from the heart, a prayer:

**Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling! {Psa 43:3 RSV}**

In other words, take hold of some promise out of Scripture, some light, some verse that speaks directly to your heart, some truth that you need to remember about the adequacy of Jesus Christ who has already put these things to death on the cross. Then you read:

**Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God. {Psa 43:4 RSV}**

This means that your own soul will respond in prayer and praise.

- Then in Verse 5 is the application, as you begin asking yourself:

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within
me? {Psa 43:5a RSV}**

“Look, you’ve already gone through this, and we’ve seen what the answer is: God is adequate. All right then, why do you feel the way you do? Why are you going on with this disgruntled mood? Why are you still unpleasant and vexatious to everybody around you? Why do you snap at people so? Why are you disquieted?”

**Hope in God; for I shall again praise
him,
my help and my God. {Psa 43:5b
RSV}**

“Just hang on. It’s going to work out in a little while and you’ll feel a lot better. Just hang on.”

You see? Now that is using the psalms the way they were intended to be used.

Also, the psalms wonderfully reveal **the person of Jesus Christ**. Remember that on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, Jesus said to the two disciples who were so troubled, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled,” (Luke 24:44 RSV). And here in the Messianic psalms you have a great picture of Christ. They give us an inside glimpse into some of the very same crises in the Lord’s earthly life that are described in the Gospels. For instance,

- Psalms 2 pictures Christ as the man of destiny, the focal point of all history. God says that every nation, every tribe, every people, every individual will find its value or its lack of value in how it relates to the Son.

**Kiss his feet,
lest ... you perish ... {Psa 2:12 RSV}**

- Psalm 22 records the Lord’s anguish on the cross. This amazing psalm takes you right to the cross itself:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? {Psa 22:1 RSV}

And he describes the scene of people standing at the foot of the cross, looking on him whom they pierced and numbering him with the transgressors; how they took his garments and cast lots for them; and how his own heart was broken as he felt abandoned by God. This is a vivid, beautiful description of the Lord’s prayer and experience on the cross, followed by the prayer of triumph in his resurrection.

- Psalm 40 is another of the prayers of the Lord and is quoted in the New Testament as a reflection of the person of Christ.
- Psalm 45, one of the most beautiful psalms, pictures the beauty of the character of Jesus Christ – the splendor of the king. And
- Psalm 72 is a magnificent psalm describing the reign of Christ over all the earth. It is one of the greatest shouts of triumph in the whole Bible.
- Psalm 110 is the great psalm on the deity of Christ and is quoted in the first chapter of Hebrews.
- Psalm 118 is the psalm of direction,

**This is the day which the Lord has
made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
(Verse 24)**

That day is when the stumbling block of men was taken and made to be the cornerstone on the day of resurrection (Verse 22).

All the psalms are designed to teach us to do one thing – to **worship**. These psalms reflect every human emotion, but they do so in a distinct and important way: they are emotions seen in relationship to God. Every psalm is written in the presence of God. This book, therefore, teaches us how to be honest before God.

- If you have a problem, tell God about it. Don’t hide it. Don’t cover it up. Especially, don’t get pious and sanctimonious and try to smooth it over.

- If you are angry with God, say so.
- If you are upset about something he has done, tell him so.
- If you are resentful, bring it out.
- If you are happy and glad, express that.

That is what worship is – a heart’s honesty. As Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, “The true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth” (John 4:23). God is looking for that kind of worshiper. And as you worship in Spirit and truth, you will discover a new source of strength. If you can be honest before God, even about those troublesome problems of wrong moods and attitudes, you will find grace answering your needs.

There is an old story of a converted miser who had always been known as an exceedingly stingy individual. After his conversion, one of his neighbors sustained a serious loss. When the former miser heard about it, his immediate reaction was, “Well, they need help and food. I will go to my smoke house and get a ham and take it over to them.” But on the way to the smoke house his old

nature began to whisper to him, “Why give them a whole ham? Half a ham will be plenty.” And he debated this all the way to the smoke house. Then he remembered what he had learned in the presence of God. He remembered that he had resolved then and there that by God’s grace he would stand against all the evil qualities of his former life whenever they asserted themselves. The tempter kept whispering, “Give him half a ham,” and the old man finally said, “Look, Satan, if you don’t pipe down, I’ll give him the whole smoke house!”

Now, you see, that is adequate grace. Where sin abounds, grace abounds much more. And that is the purpose of the psalms: to bring us to grace.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we may immerse ourselves in this marvelous book of experience and find here not only that which speaks of our own moods and attitudes, but also that which answers them in grace. We thank you for this revelation, written not merely with pen and ink, but with blood and sweat and tears, heartache and sorrow, happiness and joy – in the lives of men and women like ourselves. In Christ’s name. Amen.

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