

Introduction

The Psalms are quoted often in the NT. They are "intellectually and emotionally stimulating" with an emphasis on "intense personal relationship with God."

Yet there are difficulties understanding their message because of 1) lack of contextual specificity, and 2) imprecation on the part of the Psalter (ie hating God's enemies, Ps 139; cf. Kline on intrusion).

The term, Psalms, is from the LXX which ties the book to music (whether with an instrument or not). The Hebrew title for the book means "praises" and highlights a dominant theme (IOT 211). Many Psalms are associated with singing, of the singing, much was with instruments. Hence, the appropriateness of the LXX title. As to content, much of the Psalms are praise, hence, the appropriateness of the Hebrew title.

1A. Historical Background

Having been written over a span of a thousand years, the historical background of the Psalms is the history of Israel (IOT 213). They cover from Moses to beyond David.

"The individual psalms were historically nonspecific in order to be always relevant for use in the formal worship of Israel.

The titles are not original, but early; non-canonical, but reliable" (IOT 219) information about authorship and occasion in general terms.

2A. Literary Analysis

1B. Genre

The Psalms are a poetic anthology consisting of 150 separate compositions. These may be sub-divided into hymns of praise, laments, thanksgivings, psalms of confidence, remembrance, wisdom, and kingship.

2B. Literary context

"The primary literary context for the study of a psalm, therefore, is not the psalms that border it, but the psalms that are generically similar to it" (IOT 227).

3A. Message

In general, we have a "'microcosm' of the teaching of the whole OT. As Luther put it, the Psalms are "a little Bible, and the summary of the OT."

Even though they are mainly prayers and words addressed to God, "their inclusion in the canon attests to their nature as the Word of God" (IOT 227).

Central in the Psalms is the covenant relationship between God and his people. The psalmists "speak out in the context of the covenant" (IOT 228).

4A. Theme (in two words: Praise God; Hebrew name: praises)

O sinful and often distressed people, *praise God for His covenant faithfulness in giving His king in order to make us His image bearers (covenant keepers ourselves; like our Father) who in heartfelt submission to His law live for His glory.*

Many passages will have most of these ideas in one context. So let's do some unpacking.

1B. Faithfulness

The Psalmist will overview Israel's history to contrast our sin with God's covenant faithfulness (105, Abe lying, Joseph sold by his brothers, v. 17b; still God remembers, v. 42, he sent Joseph, v. 17a; 106, 6-8, 14, 21, 43; but God, 44-45).

2B. To sinners

He is covenantally faithful but we are great sinners in distress with many laments and confessions.

1C. Fleeing, 139

This seems to be an elaboration on the attributes of God in the abstract (omniscience, 1-6; omnipresence, 7-9). The awareness of God's knowledge leads to a sense of guilt expressed in fleeing. When we flee does His clenched fist smash us to the earth? No, even there, he holds, upholds me! (v. 10, us expressed in terms of me; intimate and personal).

This is why what God thinks and knows is precious (6, 17) as beautifully expressed in verse 18, "when I awake I am still with thee" because you are with me in covenant grace and saving mercy!

2C. Intimately

147 healing by name (cf. the stars); you are with me

3C. Graciously

78:40 (how often rebellion); yet Joshua victory, 55; a king-shepherd, 70-72; none seek God, 53:3; 103, not as we deserve; east west.

3B. Effectually (search: the place of faith)

It is effectual covenant faithfulness to sinners.

33:10-12; What surfaces when God works effectually? He fashions the heart (v. 15) and saves (it is not by human strength, 13-17; cf. not of the will of the flesh, but of God, Jn.1:13). What kind of heart emerges from this effectual work? (18-22, a fearing hoping rejoicing trusting heart).

100:3 (context for joyous praise is God's making us His)

23 The Lord is my shepherd; makes; leads; for his name; hence comfort and fellowship forever!

4B. Through his king

This faithfulness to sinners comes through his king.

King is priest, 110 (ruler is mediator between earth and heaven); he establishes righteousness and justice as the foundation of his throne, 97:2; 99:4.

Psalm 45 moves between the king in Israel in a wedding context to the king, Jesus: 1-7 with Heb. 1:8-9.

The rescued king (22:16-21) will declare God's name to his brothers (22:22). So Hebrews 2:12 with 14-18.

63:1-3 thirst for God; gloryifying God: Jesus in word and from the cross; thirst is strength in covenant fulfillment to save sinners.

118:22-23 What day? Resurrection day; the Lord's day sabbath rest. The rest promised from the beginning will be reached through the resurrection seal of redemption; now signified in Lord's day celebration! cf. Acts 4:11 with Psalm 118:22 and Matthew 21:42 with 12:1-2 & 28:20.

5B. To His law

God's people have an obligation before the law. This can be easily misconstrued due to the antithetic language of the NT: We are not under the law but under grace; the law came by Moses but grace and truth by Jesus; we are not saved by the works of the law. This might lead one to a negative view of the law in the OT.

But this is incorrect. The OT did not present the law as a merit ladder to heaven that turned into a yoke no man could bear. The law is for the covenant people. Once redeemed out of Egypt then God's people are given the law.

The Psalmist will help correct the picture. "It is within this covenantal relationship that the psalmist extols the law and presses upon the people their obligation to keep it."

There is no legalistic law tension in heartfelt OT faith. Law is sweet, saving, refreshing, and cleansing (119:103; 119:9-16; 19:7ff, warm etc; 1 a delight!).

6B. For His glory (115:1)

The imprecatory language of the Psalms should be understood as a matter of wholehearted commitment to God's glory and honor.

Imprecatory Prayers

Take 139 again. After David is caught up in contemplation of the majesty of God (omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent), he is caused to think of the wicked who are violent enemies of God.

They are not said to be enemies of God because they oppose David; they oppose God and thus become David's enemies as well (depart from me, v. 19; I hate them, v. 21; with perfect or complete hatred, v. 22).

None of this is in tension with devotion to God and righteous living for in the same breath David seeks to have all offensive thoughts searched out and countered. In flow of thought the perfect hatred is unoffensive and righteous.

Hence the imprecatory prayer: If only you would slay them! (v. 19). This is because of awe and wonder at God and His majesty; it is loathsome to the pious heart enflamed by reverence for God to witness the unbeliever's enmity toward God and the vain use of His name.

Yet this does not allow personal vindictiveness; it is God who is to judge. Appeal to the ten commandments shows the evil of God's enemies and David's commitment to righteous living. This must include loving the neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; the latter six of the ten).

Thus we will oppose those who oppose God and contend earnestly for the faith; but do so in a loving manner yet from a heart that is grieved

because of the true honor due to our God and King. (cf. Young, Psalm 139 pp. 92-117).

Hence 115:1.

4A. Message for us

We are summoned to praise.

We praise God.

We praise Him for who He is and what He does in efficacious covenant faithfulness.

We praise Him in lip and life, in being covenant keepers like our God. We do so from the heart in submission to His law that we seek to live day by day in all of life for His honor and glory; with opposition to all that deny Him glory in praise to Jesus as God and king.

When we praise Yahweh we praise Jesus.

The Psalms call us to a heartfelt and lived praise!

Approaching the NT

In Luke 24:44, Jesus told us "in no uncertain terms that the book of Psalms anticipated him and that his coming in some sense fulfilled that book" (IOT 233).

The NT writers use the Psalms to establish the identity of Jesus as Messiah (233). For example, compare Acts 4:11 with Psalm 118:22 and Matthew 21:42.

Kingship is a major theme in the Psalms, especially God as king and his chosen representative, David as king.

David anticipates the offspring of Eve and Abraham that will bring restoration from the fall by being offered on the altar of sacrifice (Ps. 22:22; Heb 2:12; in Heb. 2:14-3:6 the incarnation is stated, tied to his death for his children and brothers of Psalm 22, to be high priest and faithful like Moses over God's house/temple/people of new and old merged).

Therefore, a psalm sung to Yahweh in the OT is now sung to Jesus (Heb. 1:10-12; Ps. 102:25-27). cf. Clowney's generic reading (IOT 234, cf. Childs, OT Theology in a canonical context, pp. 207-215, note Ps 1 as a guide for reading all the Psalms).