

EXPLORING THE PSALMS

HOMEGROUP BIBLE STUDY NOTES - SESSION 1: INTRODUCTION

A COLLECTION OF WORSHIP SONGS

Just as we, in today's church, enjoy worship songs and hymns from a variety of different sources - some old, others new - we can look upon the Psalms as the worship book of ancient Israel. The Book of Psalms is actually a collection of five sets of songs, poems and prayers.

You will be familiar with many of them. Spend a few minutes discussing some of the most familiar or favourite Psalms: you might choose:

- The Lord is my Shepherd (Psalm 23);
- By the rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137);
- I lift my eyes to the hills (Psalm 121).

DISCUSS

What do these Psalms mean to you?

Can you recall events or situations when they have had special meaning?

Of course, Psalms convey different messages, and have very different tones. If you take, for example, Psalm 137 mentioned above, we can be pretty sure that this was a lament dating from around the time of the Exile of God's people in Babylon in about 550BC. Read it through to the end and you'll discover some of the most anguished lines in Hebrew poetry.

The Psalms were written over a period of some 500 years - some of the earliest ones probably came from the one of King David around 1000 BC. Often, they were used in worship, and set to music. Sometimes they would be used for festival processions, feast days and other special occasions.

The early Church knew and used the Psalms. The risen Jesus himself, when speaking to friends in Emmaus, referred to what was risen about him in the Law, prophets and Psalms. And they are a central part of Christian worship and devotion in today's Church.

We can see the Psalms as:

- **Scripture**

TAKE A LOOK AT

John 19:24

Acts 4:11

Hebrews 3:7

The words of the Psalms come to us today as part of the living Word of God. There are several references (like those above) which refer to the Psalms as Scripture, often in relation to the fulfilment of what was written.

- **Prayers**

DISCUSS

Many Psalms are cries for help from God. Can you find any examples?

Take a look at Psalm 22. *Jesus himself knew much of that Psalm.*

Take a look at Matthew 27:46 to see how Jesus made its cry of anguish his own on the Cross.

- **Corporate and family worship**

TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 136

(Get one person to read a line, and another to read the next, as a response)

*Any Psalm between 113-118
(often used as the Passover Festival -
remember, when Jesus and his disciples celebrated the last supper
as a Passover meal in the Upper Room, they sang a hymn
likely to have been Psalms 115-118)*

*Any Psalm between 120-134
(A group known as "Songs of Ascents"
which were sung as pilgrims processed into Jerusalem,
to Mount Zion and the Temple)*

*I was glad when they said to me:
'Let us go to the house of the Lord'
(Psalm 122:1)*

- **Reflecting the faith of Israel**

TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 30

*The Books of Psalms give us insights into the faith of the people of God,
into the way they prayed and worshipped, and how that worship impacted
on their understanding of living for God in the world. This Psalm was used for corporate
worship at the dedication of the Temple.*

- Poetry

TAKE A LOOK AT

Psalm 114:4

(We need to be careful about being over-literal!)

Hebrew poetry likes the rhythm and meter of words and phrases, rather than rhyme, and this often gets lost in translation into English. There are many rich images, metaphors and similes in the text, which we must look out for, but not push them beyond their limits.

Hebrew poetry also likes the 'parallelism' of saying the same thing twice over for emphasis, the second time using different words, for example:

Psalm 63:1

Or saying same thing in contrasting words:

Psalm 18.21

A number of psalms use an "acrostic" form - for example in Ps 119 each set of verses in order begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Who wrote the Psalms?

Some of the psalms in the Psalter are headed 'a Psalm of David', and it looks as though they relate to specific instances in the life and monarchy of the 'sweet psalmist of Israel'. Some may indeed have come from David's pen; others part of 'David collections', perhaps put together by him or in his name, or under his instruction. Some psalms became traditionally associated with a 'Davidic' kingly figure, and so used David's name. Other psalms are said to be from 'the Korahites', a Levitical family who worked in the Temple, either as doorkeepers, or as singers, and others were from Asaph, another of the musical Levites. Some are anonymous. Several have delightfully poetic - and to us largely unintelligible - titles: for example, Ps 22, According to the Hind of the Dawn (was that the name of a hymn tune?); Ps 56, According to the Dove on Far-off Terebinths.

The Psalms were written by people like us. One of the reasons the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible have remained such an important part of Christian worship, and of the individual spiritual lives of countless Christian disciples, is the way they engage our emotions, and, like all good poetry, open our imaginations. They are without doubt written by real human beings who feel, as we sometimes do, a sense of awe in the presence of God; shame and guilt when we have done wrong; a sense of injustice when evil people seem to get away with it; joy in forgiveness and hope in God's faithfulness; a sense of destiny under God's providence for the nation and the world; and praise and thanksgiving for all the gifts and provisions of God's love. Real human beings feel grief and fear; they know delight and fulfilment; they get it wrong, and need forgiveness; they get hungry and lonely; they suffer and die. Real human beings sometimes let out such cries of anguish and pain, even longing for vengeance, that their language becomes intemperate and too often unrepeatable. Real human beings can find God in the stillness and the silence as well as in the joyful celebration of corporate worship. We, today, read and use the Psalms from the perspective of the life and teaching of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the gift of his Spirit.

Some of the psalms are personal laments from a poet in fear of his life, or feeling God's absence, angry at injustice, or having lost his way. Some seem to be linked to royal occasions - perhaps a celebration of the enthronement of the King. Many recall - in a public festival of remembrance - God's covenant with Abraham, or with Moses at the Exodus, or much later with King David. Some corporate laments arise from a sense of national threat, and their longing for deliverance from enemies. Many others are exuberant in thanksgiving and praise to God.

A MEDITATION On Psalm 23

Psalm 23 is the most popular and well-known of all the Psalms, sung at weddings and at funerals, recited at the bedsides of the dying, and written on bookmarks and calendars, manages in six short verses to capture many of the key themes of all the psalms. It was a favourite of George Herbert's, and formed the basis of his hymn The God of Love my Shepherd is. Was it murmured by Falstaff on his sickbed, as he 'babbled of green fields' as reported by Mrs Quickly in Shakespeare's Henry V?

This psalm is first and foremost about God: 'The LORD is my Shepherd'; 'He makes me lie down'; 'He leads me beside still waters'; He restores'; 'He leads me in right paths'.

It is a prayer: 'You are with me; your rod and staff comfort me'.

God is a companion: 'You are with me;'

God is a benefactor, friend, host and protector: 'You prepare a table before me'; 'You anoint my head; 'Your blessings for me overflow'.

So the psalmist is confident in God: 'I shall not want...I fear no evil...I shall dwell in the house of the Lord.'

One primary concern is life. The Shepherd protects the life of the sheep: 'He restores my soul': the green pastures and the still water and the right paths are life-giving. God's goodness and 'steadfast love' (= covenanted faithfulness) shall follow me all the days of my life. I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

And yet there is the 'valley of the shadow of death'. There is 'evil', and there are 'enemies'. The Psalmist is perhaps recalling bitter times, even battles. Yet God provides comfort with his rod and staff; and God's presence at the table despite the enemies. The shared table is a symbol of mutual loyalty and covenant promise and shared communion. Are there hints here of the people's recollection of the Exodus as a time of God's presence, and rescue, leading and nourishment?

Discuss:

Think about times in your life when you have felt as if you're walking through a dark valley. Describe how you were sustained during that period. How (if at all) was God "real" to you - and how did you sense his presence with you?