

## ***Psalms and the Modern Christian***

People usually have warm feelings towards the psalms.

- In a time of worry, many look to the psalms for assurance.
- In times of joy, many turn to the psalms to help them express praise to God.
- In times of suffering, many seek comfort.
- In times of crisis, many seek calm.
- When facing death, many seek consolation.

People have printed leaflets or pocket-sized cards with lists of psalms for every occasion. I tried to find one at home, but can't remember where I've filed it. It'd have things like:

- When you're anxious, turn to Psalm ...
- When you're thankful, turn to Psalm ...
- When facing enemies, turn to Psalm ...

It's been like that for centuries.

- Abraham Lincoln is said to have found something in them for every day of the year.
- Calvin said the psalms were an anatomy of all parts of the soul.
- Luther called them the Bible in miniature.

You can probably quote more verses from the psalms than any other Old Testament book.

Have you ever stopped to think: Is that how the psalms are supposed to be used? Is it legitimate to take this ancient song and apply it straight to my situation today? Or to alter it slightly so it fits my situation a bit better? Or to interpret it according to my own poetical fancies to make it fit what I want it to say?

This morning's sermon is a bit different from usual. We

aren't looking at one particular passage and working out what it means. We aren't even going to concentrate on one particular psalm. Rather, we're going to think about the book as a whole – and to do so by means of several questions. In the coming weeks, we plan to look at ten individual psalms.

### **Where do the Psalms Fit in the Bible?**

The first question for us this morning is: Where do the psalms fit in the Bible? You can answer this in all sorts of ways.

- Those who like statistics are quick to point out that Psalms is right in the middle of our English Bibles.
- Those who are conscious of the big divisions are happy to point out that Psalms fits into the Old Testament.
- Those who are conscious of the slightly smaller divisions will point out that Psalms is part of the poetry section of the Old Testament – or the wisdom section.

But that's not quite what I want to get at. Rather, where does Psalms fit into the historical revelation of God's plans? Clearly, they're in the Old Testament – and so they're before Jesus. They're before the cross. They're before the full revelation of God's plans of salvation. But where do they fit into Old Testament history?

That's not an easy question to answer.

- From the little lines at the beginning of many psalms, we know that nearly half of them were written by David. We know his place in the story. And some of those little lines also tell us the exact point in David's life when they were written. For

example, look at Psalm 3:

*A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.*

- But not all the psalms do that and not all of them come from David's time. Solomon comes straight after David – and he wrote a couple.
- At least one of them, Psalm 90, is ascribed to Moses. He was well before David's time.
- Other names are attached to other psalms: Asaph, Korah, Heman, Ethan. With some of these names there's more than one guy who appears in the Bible with that particular name and so we're not always sure which one's meant – and it could also be someone totally different who's not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible..
- Psalm 137 doesn't have any name attached to it – but it's fairly clear it's written by one of the exiles in Babylon – which is well and truly after David's time.

So some of the psalms can be pinned down to a particular time in history – but not all of them.

You may ask: Does it really matter? On the one hand, we can argue that knowing the historical circumstances behind the psalm helps us better understand what the psalm's on about. As we just saw, Psalm 3 tells us it's when David fled from his son Absalom. We find that story in 2 Samuel. We know the haste with which David left Jerusalem. We can understand him feeling threatened and overwhelmed in those circumstances. It's a very significant danger for God's anointed king that's behind the words of this psalm. The words become attached to this concrete situation. The situation helps us fill in what's happening in the psalm.

Yet, on the other hand, each of these psalms now appears in Israel's hymn book. They've been taken out of their original context and put in a new context. And they're not put in that new context in chronological order. I just mentioned Psalm 137 – a psalm that comes from the exile. The very next psalm, Psalm 138, is one of David's psalms – and so is written some 400 years earlier. This mixing around of the psalms in terms of their chronological order tends to suggest something of a separation from their historical context.

This new context they're put in within a collection of psalms makes them more widely available – presumably to the community as a whole. The very fact they're put in the hymn book shows they're meant to be used by other people in different situations. There's an expectation that others will find them meaningful – not simply as history, but as relevant to their day-to-day lives.

- They've become part of Israel's corporate religious gatherings. They're used in the temple as part of the liturgy. They're used on public occasions.
- And, via that means, they've become part of the individual Israelite's religious heritage. The individual remembers these words and uses them in their private spiritual exercises.

Thus, we Christians aren't the first ones to take these psalms and appropriate them for our own use.

### **Whose Psalms are they?**

That leads to the second question: Whose psalms are they? You may think that question's a no-brainer. The answer's obvious.

- They're the psalms of the people who wrote them.

- They became Israel's psalms. They were sung in the great temple celebrations. They were part of how Israel was taught about God. They expressed in poetic form the ups and downs of Israelite life.

But they're also in our Christian Bibles. So they're our psalms too. And certainly Christians have used them for centuries. Yet, how did they become our psalms? And how should we relate to them? And can we simply use them without understanding they're part of the Old Testament? Where do they fit into the Bible's story-line?

The Bible starts with God. God alone is self-existent. Everything else is created by Him – including humans. Thus, everything belongs to God. At the start, everything's perfect. Adam and Eve are in Paradise – the garden God's provided for them. They're in harmony with God, with each other and with their environment. They live under God's perfect rule.

But then they rebel. They assert their own rule against God's. Disharmony enters. God's judgment enters. God kicks them out of the garden. But God also promises – He promises the seed of the woman will fix things up. At some point, we'll get back to the situation of humans living rightly under the perfect rule of God.

As the story progresses, we see many descendants of the woman – and they all mess things up. They're all failures in terms of fulfilling God's promises. Indeed, they fail so spectacularly, that God wipes most of them out in a flood. Yet, after the flood, God renews His promises. And, a bit later, the promises focus on one man, Abraham, and those

who'll descend from him – the nation of Israel, the nation who produced these psalms and who used them in the temple.

Yet, as we look at those who descend from Abraham, again we see failure after failure. God's good to them in so many ways. He rescues them. He provides for them. He gives them His words. He gives them their own land. Yet, still they fail to live obediently under God's rule.

- They fail under Moses.
- They fail under Joshua.
- They fail under the Judges.

And then God raises up a king – a man after His own heart – David. This king is to lead God's people to live under God's rule. And God makes impressive promises to this king as well – promises that develop further the promises He made to Abraham. David's descendants will sit on the throne forever. But it still doesn't seem to work.

- David himself commits adultery and murder.
- Solomon, his son, while he does rule after David, eventually descends into idolatry.
- Rehoboam, the next king, doesn't get to rule over the whole nation. Israel splits into two – and he gets the smaller bit.

And so it goes on – failure after failure – until finally God's had enough and sends both nations into exile, David's descendants included.

That's the historical and theological context of these psalms.

- God's made promises about His kingdom – His rule. He will deal with humanity's rebellion with-

out wiping us all out. He will establish His rule such that His people will live in harmony with each other and will submit willingly and perfectly to His rule. And those promises now centre on God's anointed King – the Messiah – the one who'll establish God's kingdom and rule over it.

- And yet, the reality is that the promises still await fulfilment. There's been failure after failure after failure. All humans still rebel against God. They don't submit to His rule. Even God's special people – the ones He's given so many advantages – even those people keep rebelling. They fail to live under God's rule. They don't live in harmony and peace. They still face all the trials and tribulations of this rebellious world.

So, like the rest of the Old Testament, Psalms is forward-looking. Yes, it also looks back. Psalms tells us about Israel – about the exodus and the law and the wilderness wanderings and the land of Canaan and the kings and their expulsion from the land. Psalms even tells us about God as Creator. But it's all in the context of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled.

- Psalms reminds Israel of those promises.
- Psalms reminds Israel of God's faithfulness in the past.
- Psalms encourages Israel to hang onto God's promises – to the vision of God establishing His just and righteous kingdom for His people.

I think that's why David's such a big part of the psalms. He's the king to whom God made the promise about his descendants. He's the king who's the prototype – a very pale shadow of a prototype – for God's coming King.

When we turn over to the New Testament, in Luke 24:44, Jesus says to His disciples:

*This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.*

Now, I should point out that the word *Psalms* here is probably bigger than what we usually understand. The Jews divided their Bibles – our Old Testaments – into three main parts.

- The law – the first five books of Moses;
- The prophets – from Joshua to 2 Kings, as well as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Twelve Minor Prophets; and
- The writings (or what's here called psalms) which included the rest – which is much more than the particular book we call Psalms.

Jesus says our Old Testaments are about Him – including Psalms. So, when we ask: Whose psalms are they? – I think we most definitely need to include Jesus in our answer.

- They're His because He's the King who comes from the line of King David.
- They're His because they point forward to Him and what He'll do.
- They're His because He reigns as God's King.

Now, that doesn't mean they're not also ours. They are that. They're part of our Christian Bibles. They're God's word to us. But they're not ours apart from Jesus. And so, for example, at a Christian funeral, we can read Ps.23:4

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

That experience is true for the Christian because of Jesus. Because of Jesus, we don't fear death. Because of Jesus, we know we don't face God's judgment after death. Because of Jesus, we do know the comfort of God. But that can't be said for the non-Christian. They may mouth the words and they may even take comfort from them – but it'll be false comfort. The non-Christian does well to fear death, for there will be no comfort for them the other side of the grave – unless they turn to Jesus.

So, as we come to a psalm – and as we seek to take it for ourselves – we can only do so through Jesus. We seek to understand what it tells us about Him. We seek to understand how it shaped His thinking – for Jesus' thoughts were well and truly shaped by God's word as we have it in the Old Testament. We seek to learn to think along similar lines. We can't simply individualise the promises and everything written in the psalms as if it's written directly about us. They only come to us through Jesus.

### What's the Structure of Psalms?

The third question for this morning: What's the structure of Psalms? In our English Bible, there are 150 chapters in Psalms – but we don't think of them as chapters in the same way as the other books of the Bible; we think of them as 150 individual psalms. Is there any order to the way these individual psalms are arranged?

- We've already noted they're not in chronological order. Psalm 138 was written well and truly before Psalm 137.
- Nor are they in order of authors. Certainly, some psalms appear to be grouped together by author – Psalms 42-49 are all by the sons of Korah. Psalms 73-83 are all associated with Asaph. Yet, these are

not the only psalms ascribed to these guys. There are others elsewhere in the collection. And David's psalms, while they often come in groups, are also scattered in different places throughout the whole collection.

The psalms have been arranged in five books. What the exact origins of these five books are, we don't know. One common explanation is that they're five earlier hymn books or collections of psalms that now have been combined into the one hymn book. That seems to me to be a reasonable explanation. But who did this and why they did it and who combined them all into the one collection, we don't know.

Most of our modern translations identify the five books.

- Book 1: Psalms 1-41
- Book 2: Psalms 42-72
- Book 3: Psalms 73-89
- Book 4: Psalms 90-106
- Book 5: Psalms 107-150

As they stand now, each of these five books ends with a doxology. So, if you have a look at Psalm 41:13

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
from everlasting to everlasting.  
Amen and amen.*

You can check out the others for yourselves later.

Many scholars suggest Psalms 1 and 2 form an introduction to the whole collection.

- Psalm 1 introduces us to two people – or two groups of people: the godly and the wicked. They're important for the rest of Psalms. It's very black-and-white. We're used to shades of grey –

and we're tempted to import those shades into our understanding of life and our reading of the Bible. That's not how God looks at it. There are only two categories – either you're for God and pay attention to what He says or you're against God and don't pay attention to what He says. There is no third group. And as you read Psalm 1 and think about it honestly, you recognise there's really only one man who truly fits into the godly category: namely, Jesus.

- Psalm 2 introduces us to the major characters. There's God – He rules over His creation. There are the nations – they foolishly plot against God and refuse to live under God's rule. There's God's Anointed, God's King, God's Son – He rules over God's kingdom. Those who are wise submit to Him.

Many consider that, overall, Psalms moves from sorrow and anguish and misery to joy and victory and praise. It's not that all the early psalms are distress and suffering – for example, Psalm 8 praises the majesty of God shown in the magnificence of creation. Nor is suffering absent from all the later psalms – it could be argued Psalm 137 is the lowest point of the whole collection. Yet, as a general trend, there's this movement from the negative to the positive. It would be a different book if it moved the other way.

In terms of the overall structure, many aren't prepared to go much beyond that. They can't discern any further overall order as to how these psalms are arranged. However, John Woodhouse suggests there's also a pattern in terms of David and God's promise to David and what's

happening to that promise.

- Book 1, he says, focuses very much on David. We hear of David in all sorts of troubles – he suffers sickness and betrayal and the hostility of his enemies. We hear how God rescues His anointed from his enemies.
- Book 2 also has a significant focus on David – and moves through his life to his son. The final psalm in this book is a prayer for Solomon – the king who takes up the promise God made concerning David's descendant.
- Book 3 moves beyond David. Faith in the goodness of God is still expressed, but the promises remain unfulfilled. Israel's been unfaithful. David's descendants have been unfaithful. God's brought judgment and suffering. The nation's shattered. The promises seem further away than ever.
- Book 4 goes back to foundations. Moses is mentioned several times in this book, but hardly anywhere else in Psalms. The real foundation for God's people is God Himself. He was their security before there was any king or temple or land. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He provided His directions for them. God reigns over His creation. He will bring His purposes to their conclusion.
- Book 5, Woodhouse says, brings us back to the issue of David. God's made promises to His anointed one and yet David suffers. But, since God's the real King, we can have confidence He'll be faithful to His promises – including the promises to His Messiah. We don't get all the answers, for the Messiah hasn't appeared by the end of Psalms – but we do get a note of praise and confidence and

trust in God.

### How Should I Read the Psalms?

The final question for this morning: How should I read the psalms? At this point, we could get quite technical:

- We could talk about the different types of psalms that have been identified: laments and thanksgivings and wisdom psalms and psalms of trust and so on. That's important, but we don't have time to do that now. Over the next 10 weeks, my aim is to look at two psalms from each of the five books and to look at 10 different types of psalm. So we will touch on some of that in coming weeks.
- We could talk about the nature of Hebrew poetry. English poetry tends to focus on rhyme and sound. Hebrew poetry tends to focus on parallelism – on saying something in one line and then developing it further in the next line. That too is important, but I'm not going to say anything further on that now.

Rather, I want to challenge you, and myself, to have a more God-centred approach to Psalms. It's easy to come with a self-centred approach.

- I'm feeling a bit down today. I want to find a psalm to give me a pick-me-up – something that'll make me feel a whole lot better.
- I'm feeling anxious this morning. I want to find a psalm to relieve my worry.

And so I go searching through them to find one to meet my need. Because the psalms cover the whole range of human emotions and experiences, I can usually find one to fit what I perceive as my needs.

But, if the psalms have this primary focus on the Messiah

– on God's future (from their perspective) anointed King – then shouldn't I believe that, initially at least, they're more about Him than me? And if Jesus says the psalms are about Him, then shouldn't I focus on what they're telling me about Jesus' place in God's plans?

Ultimately, it's Jesus who's King. He's the One who announced:

*The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the gospel.*

He's the One who calls us to follow Him. Yes, life is complex. It's full of trials and suffering. It throws up all sorts of issues for us. Temptations come at us from all sides. Yet, we must have the right perspective.

- This is God's world and He rules. Especially, He rules through His King, Jesus.
- The nations foolishly reject that. They reject God's rule. They reject His anointed King.
- But the one who's wise submits to the King.

This must be the bedrock reality of our lives – and of the way we approach this book.