

STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Study 1

By Way of Introduction

Read Psalm 150

The Book of the Psalms is the longest and most varied of the Books of the Bible, and stands right in the centre of the Scriptures. Perhaps as you look at its contents, you wonder just where to begin. Obviously, in our study of the Psalms we will not be able to cover all the book, but we should be able to grasp something of the general character and contents of this beautiful portion of God's Word. The first lesson may seem a little disjointed, but the aim is to give a general picture of the most important points.

Psalms, the Old Testament Hymnal, is actually a collection of five books, each ending with a climax of praise to God.

The divisions are:

- | | | |
|--------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Book 1 | <i>Psalms 1-41</i> | Note <i>Psalm 41: 13</i> . |
| Book 2 | <i>Psalms 42-72</i> | Note <i>Psalm 72: 18-20</i> . |
| Book 3 | <i>Psalms 73-89</i> | Note <i>Psalm 89: 52</i> . |
| Book 4 | <i>Psalms 90-106</i> | Note <i>Psalm 106: 48</i> . |
| Book 5 | <i>Psalms 107-150</i> | Note <i>Psalm 150</i> . |

Most of the Psalms are prefaced by a title or heading which is later than the Psalm itself but preserves very ancient Jewish tradition. The meaning of many of the terms used can now only be guessed at.

Many different authors were responsible for the Psalms. You will notice this as you read the titles of them. Seventy three bear David's name, the great Shepherd King, who has been called the sweet singer of Israel. Yet it is true to say that all who wrote, gave expression to very real feelings arising out of their lives. The Psalms themselves express the whole range of human feeling and experience, from dark depression to exuberant joy. Although they are rooted in particular circumstances, they are timeless, and thus are among the best loved and most often read parts of the Bible. In our modern age we are still stirred by the same emotions, puzzled by the same fundamental problems of life, and cry out in need, or worship, to the same God as the Psalmist of old.

There have been many attempts to classify the Psalms and they can be grouped in a number of ways; for example, by theme. But we should always remember as we read them that the Psalms were originally written as poems - poems intended to be sung, and all are part of the religious life of Israel. Nevertheless, there is much for us to learn from them, so we will look at some of their main features.

1. PRAISE. You will notice the Psalms open with God

blessing man; "*Blessed (happy) is the man*", *Psalm 1: 1*. But you will also see that the book ends with men praising God. "*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord*", *Psalm 150: 6*. All creation praises God in a silent but wonderful way. So we can learn this lesson at the very outset of our studies, that out of our lives as they are open to God's blessing, much wonderful praise can be given to God. Is this true of your life?

The Book of Psalms has been called the hymn book of the Jewish nation, and it is full of 'hymns' in praise of God's character and deeds, e.g. *Psalms 8, 9* and *29*. You have already read *Psalm 150*, and there again one is aware of the tremendous expression of praise to God. It forms the closing doxology to the whole collection.

2. PRAYER. There are many prayers and supplications in this book - prayers which came out of very deep and difficult experiences; sometimes national, sometimes personal. *Psalms 25, 51* and *61* are examples of this. If we are true Christians, praise and prayer should always go together in our lives.

3. PROTEST. Many of the modern songs we hear sung today are protests against the ills and evils of our society. Men often express their protest in song. Some of the Psalms are like this, expressing the way in which life seems unfair and out of harmony with what God really intended. But they also give guidance as to the way in which some of these problems can be settled, and we will be considering some of these Psalms in our studies.

4. PROPHECY. Many of these Psalms deal with the present or even past life of the writer, or the nation of Israel. But others look forward to the future and foretell events which will take place much later on. There are Psalms which speak of Jesus Christ and His coming, and we will also look at some of these in our studies.

5. PRACTICAL. Perhaps above everything else, the Psalms contain much that is of a practical and personal nature, and it will be really good if in these studies you find something which will help you in your life in a practical way. Maybe you will learn more of God's dealings with men and His Will for your life through these wonderful poems and hymns. Or maybe you will find out more about prayer and its importance in the life of a Christian. Whichever way, we pray that you will be blessed through the study of this book.

Study 2

Meet the Happy Man!

Read Psalm 1

It is always a pleasure to meet someone who we feel is truly happy. By this we mean someone who is not just jolly or light-hearted, but one who, we feel, has found a source of deep satisfaction and happiness. The roots of true joy and happiness go deep below the surface, and are unaffected by the changing moods and fortunes of life. For true happiness is not in our circumstances, but deep within ourselves. It is not something we see, like a rainbow, or feel, like the heat of the fire on a cold day. Happiness is something we ARE.

At the gateway to this book of the Psalms, there stands the figure of a truly happy man, and in our present study we can consider this happy man in five ways -

1. His **CHOICE**
2. His **COURSE**
3. His **COMPANIONS**
4. His **CONSIDERATIONS**
5. His **CONDITIONS** of Life

1. Let us first look at his **CHOICE**. It is obvious, as we read of this man, that the way in which he lived was by choice and not by chance. We can imagine him weighing up the effects that his kind of life would have upon his well-being. He chose his course, his companions and his occupations. He really wanted to know joy and satisfaction, so he resolutely turns his back on evil and sets his heart and mind on God's law.

This reminds us that we cannot be casual about the way in which we live. We can easily drift along on the tide of evil if we make the wrong decisions. It has been aptly said that even a dead fish can go with the stream, but it takes a live one to swim against it. The Christian life is not for the careless or indifferent person. It takes determination on the part of the individual to be a true follower of Christ, as more and more we see the norms of society and popular opinion running counter to the holy standards of God. It was Joshua who once challenged the people he was leading, with these words, "**Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve**". (**Joshua 24: 15**) What about you? Will you take the stand that Joshua did and say, "**as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord**"? To choose the Lord Jesus as Saviour and to follow Him as Lord, is to find real happiness.

2. Next we follow this man's **COURSE**. Notice again **verse 1**. Where he walked, or stood, or sat, was designed to avoid detrimental influences. He avoided the ungodly, the sinners and the scornful, suggesting that the course of this happy man was not marred by wrong or harmful contacts. In **Matthew 7: 13 & 14**, the Lord Jesus told the parable of the two roads. The broad road led to destruction; the narrow way led to life. Happiness comes from setting the right course and treading the right road in life. We are left in no doubt as to which the right course is, for the Lord Jesus said of Himself, "**I am the Way, the Truth and the Life**". (**John 14: 6**)

3. Notice now his **COMPANIONS**. We can be sure that if he did not associate with such characters as the ungodly or sinners, then he found the right kind of friends in life.

Friends have a tremendous influence on the kind of lives that we live. In fact our lives can be made or marred by the company we keep. If you are a Christian, then choose Christian friends. If you are a young person contemplating marriage, then be sure you choose a Christian as your partner in life. The Bible is very clear in its teaching on such relationships, as for example in **2 Corinthians 6: 14 & 15**, and only by following such teaching will you ever experience true happiness. Remember too, the words of the Lord Jesus to His would-be disciples, "**You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you**." (**John 15: 14**)

4. What are the **CONSIDERATIONS** of this happy man? "**His delight is in the Law of the Lord and in His Law he meditates day and night**." (**verse 2**) In his thinking and meditation, this man found the source of his joy. He loved God's Word, and it brought him delight to think upon it. We need to fill our minds with pure thoughts that will make us happy. Read **Philippians 4: 8** in this context, and you will see there a list of virtues with which we need to occupy our thoughts. Then in thinking and meditation on God's Word, as we read it day by day, we, too, shall find true happiness. Be sure you make this your daily practice.

5. Finally, we note the **CONDITIONS** under which the happy man lived. The Psalmist looks at a fertile place near to a flowing river. Here is a tree that is fruitful in every sense of the word, because it is planted beside the stream. A tree planted beside water was a vivid picture in a dry country such as Israel. The roots of the tree would go right down into the river, drinking deeply of its life-giving waters, see also **Jeremiah 17: 7 & 8**. The man who is happy because his life is right with God, is like this tree. Everything he does, prospers, and the value of his life is recognised by all, including the Lord. (**verse 6**)

In stark contrast, we have presented in **verses 4-6**, a picture of the present life and future fate of the wicked. So at the conclusion of our study of this first Psalm we can learn this lesson: *Holiness and happiness go together.*

Study 3

God, the Universe and Man

Read Psalm 8

It is obvious as we read this Psalm that the writer has done some deep thinking. This is a Psalm of David and one thing you will notice about some of his Psalms, is his awareness of the greatness and beauty of the universe. As a shepherd, no doubt, he had plenty of time to observe the work of God in creation. Whether in the day time or at night, the wonder of all God's works made a deep impression upon him, and this Psalm gives some evidence of this impression.

We can look at three important features in our study -

1. The **POWER** of **GOD**
2. The **PATTERN** of **CREATION**
3. The **PLACE** of **MAN** in **CREATION**

Although we can only touch on these truths here, yet they can have great meaning for us.

1. The **POWER** of **GOD**

Notice how the Psalm opens and closes: "**O Lord, our**

Lord, how excellent is Your Name in all the earth.” (verses 1 & 9) The main portion of our material for study is sandwiched between these two bursts of praise regarding God’s greatness. David was thinking about his God, and all that his understanding of Him meant. But what did he mean when he spoke of His **“excellent Name”**? When we think of someone’s name we think of their character and reputation, and this immediately colours our thinking with regard to that person. There are some people in our world today, who are almost universally loved and respected. There are others who are almost universally feared and hated, and the very mention of their name stirs up those feelings within us. So here the writer thought of the impact that God made in the earth or the world - His Name was powerful and excellent, and the psalmist acknowledges that none other than He, is the universal, sovereign ruler.

Now look at the contrast in **verse 2** between **“glory above the heavens”** and **“the mouth of babes”**. Both alike make known God’s power. Perhaps David was thinking of his encounter with Goliath in **1 Samuel 17**. It was through the seeming weakness of David that God showed His power, and the **“enemy and the avenger”** was actually defeated. Remember as you think of God’s mighty power, that He can use dramatic ways of displaying it to us. But He can as easily take the simple things to express that same power. Yes, the majestic glory of God, seen stamped upon the heavens, is equally seen when He takes the insignificant babes of earth and uses them to confound the ungodly.

2. The PATTERN of CREATION

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have ordained.” (verse 3) Pause here and think carefully about this verse. You will notice that David had no doubts regarding the fact that God was the Creator of the universe. To him, the universe was visible evidence of God’s mighty power. This is important.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, we are told that the heavens and the earth are the result of evolution; the products of gradual change and growth. Even many highly educated and thinking people, see no plan or Controller behind the universe, of which our earth is only a very tiny part. As you read the Psalms, you will find ample confirmation of the events recorded in **Genesis 1: 1**. God made the heavens and the earth, and its very pattern tells us of the greatness of the Mind that planned it all. Many times during the stillness of the night David had looked up to see the moon and the stars; great bodies of light in an even greater universe. To him, they were designed and built by God’s fingers. What a wonderful God He is! May you come to realise this more and more as you study this Psalm.

3. The PLACE of MAN in CREATION

A sense of paradox is being built up in this Psalm, and this is now developed with regard to man’s existence. **“What is man that You are mindful of him?” (verse 4)** We may well ask this question, as David did, when he compared man’s frailty and insignificance, with the greatness of the universe. What place can man take in the great plan of God the Creator? Reason and observation can offer no answer to this question. It can be met only by divine revelation, which discloses that there is a three-fold peculiarity about man which lifts him from that insignificant position, to one

of amazing eminence.

i) **“For You have made him a little lower than the angels,” (verse 5a)** - only a little lower than God Himself, and in His image. (**Genesis 1: 27**)

ii) This image of God given to man is accompanied by certain attributes or characteristics, **“glory and honour”**, (**verse 5b**) which mark out man as superior to all other creatures.

iii) Moreover **verse 6**, the world and all its forms of life have been placed under man’s authority. (**Genesis 1: 26 & 28**) What a place to hold!

This consciousness of a high calling and destiny so stirs David’s heart that he ends the Psalm with the exultant note of praise to God.

Yet David also knew, as we do, that **Genesis 3**, tells how man lost his high position in Creation through sin. Thus the Lord Jesus came into the world as a man so that through His death and resurrection, man will one day regain his place in the universe, which was lost through sin and disobedience.

It is also interesting to notice that the New Testament in **Hebrews 2: 5-9**, takes up this Psalm and amplifies it applying it to our Lord Jesus Christ in whom is fully seen the dominion which God intended man to have and which, in and through Christ, all believers will one day share. What a great day that will be!

Study 4 The Road to Satisfaction

Read Psalm 16

In this lesson we are going to study one of the most beautiful of all the Psalms. Perhaps as you read it for the first time, you will find difficulties in it. So read it carefully more than once, for there is so much in it. Notice two things about it to begin with:

1. It is a “Michtam of David”. As with **Psalm 8** David is the author. “Michtam” simply means ‘a prayer’ or ‘meditation’. There are five other such Psalms in the Book, **Psalms 56-60** inclusive. **Psalms 56, 57, 59** and **60** are all prayers which arise out of particular incidents or situations of difficulty in David’s experience. **Psalms 58** and **16**, the one we are considering, are more like meditations, but include elements of prayer. So let us meditate a little upon this lovely Psalm.

2. This is one of a group of Psalms known as the **Messianic Psalm**. This simply means that they are poems or songs which look forward to the coming of Christ. They describe something of His character and work. You will perhaps see what this means if you read **Acts 2: 25-28**, where Peter quotes from this Psalm in connection with Christ. Again in **Acts 13: 35-37**, Paul takes up the words of **verse 10** and applies them to Christ, thus showing their deeper significance.

The psalm opens with a prayer for preservation, **“Preserve me, O God”**. (**verse 1**) It closes with a positive statement of satisfaction, as the path of life is found. (**verse 11**)

How good to realise that prayer often opens up for us the pathway which leads to the most satisfying goal in life. Keep this in mind as we continue our study.

A suggested outline of the Psalm has been given in the following way, by describing four “looks”.

1. A Look **ABOVE**
2. A Look **AROUND**
3. A Look **WITHIN**
4. A Look **BEYOND**

Let US examine these points.

1. A Look **ABOVE, verses 1-2**. Here is a prayer which expresses absolute trust in God. The writer is so aware of his utter dependence on God that he knows there is no one else to whom he can look for help. It is good to remind ourselves here that God does answer prayer. He never fails those who trust in Him. Prayer must play a vital part in the lives of all true Christians. (See **Philippians 4: 4-7**) David feels his danger as, no doubt, he often did, when King Saul was seeking his life. If you read David's life history you will see just how many times God answered his prayers. If we know the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour, then God will answer our prayers as well, and many of you will be able to bear testimony to this.

2. A Look **AROUND, verses 3-4**. We have already thought of the influence of good companions upon our lives. Here the writer looks around him and sees “**saints**”, those in whom he delights. He then describes those whose names he will not even take upon his lips. It is good to be able to discern the right qualities in people. Not, of course, that we should be critical of others, but David, as he wrote this, knew by perceptive observation who were his true friends and most helpful companions. Do we?

3. A Look **WITHIN, verses 5-7**. Now the psalmist looks within his own life, and takes stock of all the reasons for his satisfaction. Notice that the “**Lord is his portion** “. In other words, first place is given to the Lord in his life; hence his sense of well-being. He feels that he possesses real wealth - “a goodly heritage”, and he finds counsel to guide him in his way. How good to be able to examine our own lives and find evidence of true satisfaction in them. True pleasure stems from the Lord Jesus indwelling our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Notice **John 4: 13-14**.

4. A Look **BEYOND, verses 8 -11**. In the closing verses of this Psalm, David looks beyond his present life, even beyond death, into the very presence of God. Notice his attitude to the Lord - He is always set before him. (**verse 8**) He is assured of the Lord's presence all the time, and because of this, he is not even afraid of death. “**Hell,**” or “**Sheol**”, was the place where Jewish people believed their spirits went when they were dead. It was a place of waiting, before the final judgment. How wonderful to look beyond it and see a path of life which led into God's presence, where unending pleasures were to be found. While these verses can only apply fully to the Lord Jesus, - (read again the portions in **Acts 2 and 13**) - they can also be enjoyed by all who know God through the Lord Jesus Christ as their risen Saviour. Thus the man, or woman, who sets their heart on God and puts their life in God's hands, finds joy and security for the present, and a glorious prospect for the future. What a satisfying climax to our study!

Questions

Study 1

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

1. a) How are the Psalms usually divided?
b) What is true of each section?
2. Why are the Psalms among the best loved, and most often read parts of the Bible?
3. Why are the Psalms often called the Old Testament or Jewish Hymnal?
4. In what way can certain Psalms be compared with some of our modern songs?
5. Why are some Psalms termed ‘prophetic’?

Study 2

MEET THE HAPPY MAN!

1. In choosing the course for his life, what positive action did this man take?
2. Why is the Christian life not for the careless or indifferent person?
3. Why is it important to choose the right companions in life?
4. Why should we occupy our minds with pure thoughts?
5. With what vivid picture does the psalmist compare the happy man?

Study 3

GOD, THE UNIVERSE AND MAN

1. What had made a deep impression on the mind of the psalmist?
2. What great truth is brought out in the contrast of **verse 2**?
3. What important fact can we be assured of as we consider the “Pattern of Creation”?
4. What conclusion did the psalmist come to in **verses 5 and 6** regarding man's place in the universe?
5. How does the writer to the Hebrews use this Psalm?

Study 4

THE ROAD TO SATISFACTION

1. What are the two main characteristics of this Psalm?
2. Why is prayer so important in the life of a Christian?
3. What is the basis of the psalmist's deep satisfaction?
4. In what way can **verses 8-11** be applied to the Lord Jesus?
5. What can the man or woman who “**sets the Lord always before him**”, expect to find?