

Hallelujah, Praise the Lord

Psalms

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During his lifetime David had found himself in situation after situation that inspired him to sing songs to the Lord. He wrote these songs as prayers, sometimes praising God, sometimes asking for victory over an enemy, sometimes mourning a loss, sometimes seeking guidance.

In time many of David's songs were gathered together. Over the course of seven hundred years or so, many more songs, poems, and prayers were added to the collection. These were written by a man named Asaph, by a liturgical choir called the Sons of Korah, by David's son Solomon, and many others including one by Moses, yes, that Moses, the "Let my people go!" Moses.

Psalms reached its final state about three hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The opening words of the collection are an admonition to live in righteousness and in so doing to receive God's blessing. Here are those opening words from Psalm 1:1-3:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3 NIV)

Psalms is comprised of one hundred fifty Hebrew poems almost half of which are attributed to David. The primary objective of these poems is not to convey information, but rather to evoke an emotional response. There are many different types of psalms, but they can be separated into two general categories: laments and praises.

A lament emotes about a crisis situation and asks God to intervene. It's a prayer of pain or sorrow, anger or confusion, and is often characterized by the question, "How long, O Lord?" A lament moves from despair to hope, ending with an expression of faith in God. One example of lament is Psalm 13:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, O Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death; my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13 NIV)

Did you notice how the tone changed just before the end? "I trust in your unfailing love." That's fairly typical of a lament. It might go on for several pages complaining about how things are right now, but it will almost always come around in the end to an expression of faith in God.

The other general category is praises. Psalms of praise give thanks to God, tell of what God has done, and express joy and celebration. Psalm 100 is a good example:

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100 NIV)

Psalms is arranged into five groupings or books – books of prayer, praise, and religious instruction for the people of Israel. By the time of King Hezekiah, they were recognized as liturgical hymnals (2 Chronicles 29:30). These five books of psalms retell in song the same story told by the Torah, the books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; by the historical books – Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles; and by the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all the rest. They speak of God's creative power, of Israel's journey toward and growth as a nation, of God's covenant with the people, of exile and return, of the Lord's faithfulness, and of the people's need for faithfulness to the Lord. They offer wisdom and knowledge while fostering hope for the coming of the Messiah.

Each of these five groupings or books of Psalms has its own distinct character and message. In Book One we are reminded of the Messiah who will arise from the line of David. And just as David called out to God, was delivered, and was made king of Israel, the future Messiah will call out to God, be delivered, and be made king of all the nations. Psalm 22 says:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?... All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads; 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him...' ...they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones... They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." [The Lord] has listened to his cry for help. ...all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:1, 7-8, 16-18, 24, 27-28 NIV)

Book Two of Psalms speaks of God's promise that everyone on earth would be blessed because of Abraham (Genesis 12:3). It also says that promise will be fulfilled through the coming Messiah. From Psalm 72:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. ...All nations will be blessed through him... (Psalm 72:1, 5, 17 NIV)

Book Three of Psalms reminds us that despite the downfall of the Davidic kingdom, God is faithful and the Messiah is coming; that even if we feel separated from God, God is faithful and will never forsake us. In Psalm 89 the Lord says:

"I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. ...my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure." (Psalm 89:20, 27-29 NIV)

And in Psalm 80, after damaging their relationship with the Lord, the people of Israel cry out:

Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire... Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. (Psalm 80:3, 16-17 NIV)

Book Four of Psalms reminds us that God always has been, is, and always will be in control. It says that all of creation looks forward to the coming Messiah and will celebrate his arrival. From Psalm 90:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. ...from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (Psalm 90:1-2 NIV)

And from Psalm 96:

Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns." The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved... Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound... let the fields be jubilant... ...for he comes, he comes to judge the earth... (Psalm 96:10-13 NIV)

The final book of Psalms, Book Five, promises the Messiah will overcome all evil and establish the kingdom of God on earth. From Psalm 110:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." The Lord is at your right hand... He will judge the nations, ...crushing the rulers of the whole earth. (Psalm 110:1, 4-6 NIV)

And from Psalm 147:

The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. (Psalm 147:2-3 NIV)

Each of the first four books of Psalms ends with a doxology. For example, here's the one that ends Book 2:

Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen. (Psalm 72:18-19 NIV)

Although psalms of lament and praise can be found throughout all five books of Psalms, psalms of lament dominate the first three books. But lament leads to thanksgiving and praise. Psalms of praise overcome those of lament in the last two books, and the entire collection ends with five psalms that repeat over and over again:

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