

THE PSALMS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

DR CHARLES VOGAN

INTRODUCTION

The book of Psalms is probably the Old Testament book that Christians turn to the most. The Prophets can be imposing with their severe examination and condemnations, and the Law we just write off completely. But the Psalms feel more like the cry of the heart; here we give vent to our emotions and turn to God for help, for a listening ear, for hope in solving our problems. Here are powerful praises to God that we can use in our worship. Just about everyone identifies with emotions.

But that emotional openness of the book may be why people aren't thinking through what they're looking at. Our emotions are stronger than our thoughts; our hearts often lead our heads. While crying out to God is a privilege of the saints, paying attention to *what the Word says* will keep us from going astray. One can use any passage in the Bible to support any idea! And there have been many strange ideas put forth based on passages in the Psalms that are not corroborated by other Biblical passages.

It's not about me

The Bible shouldn't be interpreted by the heart first. This is the problem: most people are really tempted to look at the personal pronouns used in these Psalms – “I”, “me”, “my” – and personalize the entire thing to his/her own circumstances in life. For example, let's look at Psalm 30.

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn *me* up
and have not let *my* foes rejoice over *me*.

O LORD *my* God, *I* cried to you for help,
and you have healed *me*.

O LORD, you have brought up *my* soul from Sheol;
you restored *me* to life from among those who go down to the pit.

(Psalms 30:1-3)

Now that we've established that this Psalm is talking about *me*, we can plug in any kind of problems or enemies that we want and cry out to God for help in dealing with them. And of course our lives *are* full of problems and enemies, so the Psalm seems ready-made for a suitable prayer when we need help.

But we are conveniently missing something that was written at the very beginning of the Psalm:

A Psalm of David. A song at the dedication of the Temple.

The Psalm is not about us – it's about David. He wrote it in the context of his own circumstances: he was the King of Israel, responsible for pulling the nation together under the Mosaic Law, and responsible for seeing that the Covenant Promises made to their forefather Abraham were fulfilled across the country. He needed resources from

God to accomplish these great tasks – and he knew he could appeal to God for those specific resources because God chose him for the purpose of bringing the country back to himself.

David's Mission

So when, for example, he prays about dealing with his enemies, he means very specific enemies – whoever would fight against his Kingdom, his rule over Israel, his economic, political, religious and social programs implementing the King's will. And there were many who were opposed to what David had to do. In fact, it's entirely possible that *we* are also opposed to David's program – which means he actually *is* praying about us, but not as we would have liked. We just might be his enemies because of our stand against his Mission.

The Psalms were written either by David himself or by men trained by David (a training program that extended through several generations). For example, the “sons of Asaph” were appointed by David to their tasks at the Temple, and taught how to conduct the worship service there. This means that the Psalms focus on what was important to David – and therefore what was important to God, since David was “a man after God's own heart.” So they weren't written to address our personal problems; they targeted Israel's issues, God's spiritual agenda among them, the Kingdom principles of David. If we miss this, we miss the real purpose of the Psalms and consequently are twisting God's Word to suit our own agendas. And, again, that would mean that we aren't on the same page with the King since we're ignoring *his* program and substituting it with our own.

David was given a task that nobody before him had been able to do: he had to pull the Twelve Tribes of Israel together into one Nation before God, ready and able to receive the blessings of the Covenant Promises given to their forefather Abraham. The way he did it was to execute five steps:

- *First*, he established a capital city – Jerusalem – which would be the political and religious center of Israel.
- *Second*, he defeated the enemies of Israel once for all.
- *Third*, he led the Israelites back to God and got rid of the worship of false gods.
- *Fourth*, he created a government – a hierarchy over which God ruled by his Law.
- *Fifth*, he laid plans for the Temple and its worship – the House of God.

By doing these five things, David created a solid foundation for the people of God to live with their God in spiritual and physical prosperity.¹

So when we read the Psalms, we are listening in on the King discussing this 5-Point Plan with God. These issues were always on his heart; nothing else mattered to him. He knew that God greatly desired these foundation stones to be laid in Israel, and of course

¹ You can read more about David's Plan in *The Throne of David*, Ravenbrook Publishers: 2006.

the King spent all his time and energy carrying out this Plan. To interpret Psalms in any other way than what was on King David's heart is to miss the whole point of the book.

Christ's Mission as well

Probably everyone would willingly admit that the Psalms prophesy about Jesus Christ. But most have a shallow understanding of this concept. They're actually talking about the commonly known prophecies like "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1), the words spoken by Christ from the cross. Or this one: the Prophet Zechariah predicted that Israel's Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, and that's just what Jesus did. (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:5) Another one is "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." (Psalm 110:4) Hebrews 5:6 quotes this verse as it explains Christ's unique priesthood.

But Psalms expounds on Christ in a much more profound way than these simple prophecies of his life-events that are recorded in the Gospels. To put it simply, David in his role as King and executor of the Covenant of Abraham showed us what and how Christ himself fulfills these same roles in his spiritual ministry. We could multiply examples here, but we will wait until we actually get into the Psalms before we draw parallels. Suffice it to say that we can easily replace the words "David" and "I" and "me" with "Jesus" and come away with the same picture. They were both going after the same things, both of them working on the same projects in the same way. The entire book illuminates the ministry of Christ the King and Priest.

So the second level of interpreting the Psalms (the first being around David and his Plan) is the work that Christ does in *his* Kingdom. How David accomplished his Mission in his day is exactly the same methodology that Christ uses in his Church.

David and Israel's worship

We have no record of what liturgies and worship services were used in the Tabernacle (the Tent of Meeting) before the time of David. The Law of Moses outlines the sacrifices that God expected the Israelites to perform, but there are no songs recorded from that early time (except for the Song of Moses, created during the first Passover). No doubt there were liturgies used, but we don't have a record of what they were.

So when David was given the task of setting up the Temple and its services, he laid the entire thing out on blueprints.

All this he made clear to me in writing from the hand of the LORD, all the work to be done according to the plan. (1 Chronicles 28:19)

Now all that Solomon had to do was to build it. Everything was planned out: the Temple construction, the teams of Levites and their respective responsibilities, the worship services, everything. The record of his plans was preserved in detail for us in the last few chapters of 1 Chronicles.

And for the rest of Israel's history the Jews followed David's plans to the letter. See, for example, the references to David's plans in Nehemiah, written hundreds of years after King David.

And the chiefs of the Levites: Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers who stood opposite them, to praise and to give thanks, *according to the commandment of David the man of God.* (Nehemiah 12:24)

And after them went Hoshai and half of the leaders of Judah, and Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah, and certain of the priests; sons with trumpets: Zechariah the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mattaniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zaccur, son of Asaph; and his relatives, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani, *with the musical instruments of David the man of God.* (Nehemiah 12:32-36)

And they performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, *according to the command of David and his son Solomon.* For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. (Nehemiah 12:45-46)

So under David the worship of God took on a concrete and permanent form. Israel was careful to adhere closely to David's program for the rest of the Old Testament history; we Christians should also take seriously what David knew to be critical for our relationship to God.

The Mission of the Church

That makes the Psalms a spiritual asset to the Church: *this* is what David – *and* God – think worship should be like. These are the prayers that we should be using. This is the program that is on God's heart, what he wants us to be passionate about also. These spiritual treasures are what we need to see in God, and these are the resources of Heaven that we need to focus on for our own tasks in the Church. In other words, the entire context of the Psalms is that of the King putting together his Kingdom in God's way, for God's glory.

For David and his generation it was obvious how to use the Psalms. There was the Temple in Jerusalem; there were the priests; and there was the Law specifying how to worship their God. Everyone knew what had to be done. Everything naturally fell into place now that David had put into writing what worship was supposed to be, and now that he sat on the throne to fulfill the Law and the Abrahamic Covenant across the Kingdom. As chief executive, it was his responsibility to make sure it got done God's way.

For us, however, we have no Temple to look at, and we certainly don't feel it necessary to obey the Mosaic Law. We weren't raised with all of that, therefore we think it's not important. So it's difficult to take the Psalms seriously as David meant them. We much prefer to personalize them for our own use, not for God's purposes. But we miss

two important realities when we so casually ignore their original context: *first*, there *is* a Temple to worship God in – it’s in Heaven now. And it’s just as the Old Testament describes it, down to the last detail. The physical Temple was a faithful copy, or shadow, of the original in Heaven where God lives. “They serve a copy and shadow of the Heavenly things.” (Hebrews 8:5) If for no other reason than that, we need to acknowledge the requirement to worship God in the same way that David prescribed for the Temple worship in his day.

Second, Jesus is now ministering in that Heavenly Temple for eternity. He conforms his ministry exactly to the requirements of the Law. If we could see him, we would realize that he’s following David’s Plan – or more exactly, David obviously got his Plan from the eternal ministry of Christ in Heaven. The two are identical.

Therefore that leaves us with the conclusion that the Psalms are to be used in the way that David intended for them – for worship in God’s Temple, in a way pleasing to God (the way the Law prescribes), following the ministry of our High Priest who set the standard. That of course teaches us an extremely important point about the Old Testament in general: it’s a textbook for the Church and its work. Paul says as much.

... the sacred writings [*which in Paul’s day was the Old Testament*], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Hermeneutics

One of the main problems about conforming the Psalms to our modern needs is the way we’ve changed the meanings of common words used. When David used these terms, he saw them in context of Old Testament history, going all the way back to Creation, and the deliverance from Egypt during the Passover, through the Conquest of Canaan, the period of the Judges, and his own Kingdom. Israel’s history filled the words of their worship with unique meanings.

We, however, don’t share that heritage and often underestimate their importance (even when we think about it!). For example, when we say “kingdom,” we have negative connotations of that political structure (remember the American Revolution?) and we tend to mentally replace the word with “democratic”. God may have wanted a kingdom for David, but we certainly don’t want to be ruled over like that; we expect God to check in with us for our opinions, since we all have the vote.

When we twist the Psalm to address our own issues, we generally use the justification that “God’s Word is applicable to every generation,” but that’s not an honest explanation of what’s going on here. We’re ignoring the context. We first have to find out what it meant to David and Israel; we will be surprised to learn that their understanding puts a whole new light on God’s Kingdom and its operations and requirements. Jesus didn’t

sign off on our agendas, but on David's. (Matthew 1:1) Ignoring all that has set us off into the wrong direction.²

But in David's day, "Kingdom" meant all and more than we can imagine. The king had total authority; personal opinions meant nothing to him. Nobody had "rights" or "freedom" – that was treasonous talk. You were supposed to obey the word of the King or you automatically forfeited your life, right on the spot. It was a hierarchy, rule from the top down; there was no room for discussion, only for obeying the word of the King as he passed the Law of God down to the people. There was no such thing as voting on any issue.

David was a crucial step in God's dealings with Israel. His story makes up a third of the Old Testament, if we count the history designed to lead up to his Kingdom, his and Solomon's writings, and the history of his descendants both succeeding and failing to "do as their father David had done." Both God and David knew the foundational significance of his Kingdom.

And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth ... Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house ... And your house and your Kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Samuel 7:9, 11, 16)³

So we've got to get these old meanings deep into our souls if we want to truly understand the Psalms. Other words had equally significant meanings that we have conveniently (and dishonestly) changed to suit our own desires: *righteous, enemy, holy, Law, blessings*. We can't honestly put our own meanings to these words in the text when David meant something totally different by them. That means we have to start all over and listen to what David, the heir of Abraham, the King of Israel under God's Law, meant when he prayed about these issues. What *he* meant is what we need; those old values must also be our values if we want to be part of Christ's Kingdom.

Interpreting the Psalms

Evidently these Psalms were sung during Temple worship; but we really have no idea of what that would have sounded like. We understand "music" to have rhythm and meter and rhyme; the Psalms rarely have those, the way we understand the terms. Even when we look at the Hebrew original, we can't figure out how they could have sung these songs. So we're not going to worry about that part of the Psalms here. What we're going to focus on is *what* is said, and *why* it is said. There is a spiritual purpose and use for the Psalms that still holds good for the Church. This is material for the worship and prayer of all of God's people – we don't want to miss that purpose.

² Which, I believe, is one of the primary reasons the Church is in such bad shape spiritually right now. Even in Israel's day, when kings refused to follow David's Plan, Jerusalem ended up in ruins and slavery to her enemies.

³ And this means that the current attitude about David – that he was a sinner, and has little importance for the Church – is totally wrong. Jesus and the Apostles never focused on his sins, but on his crucial importance to God's Kingdom.

For the record, there are certain things that we have to stop doing with the Psalms and other things we have to start doing. When we take the wrong approach we are ignoring the context, we're personalizing them to suit our own circumstances, and we're not leaving the door open to fulfillment in Christ. Interpretive rules (*hermeneutics*) are just as important for Psalms as they are for other parts of the Bible.

- *First*, they are not about us. Start with David, understand what he was trying to do among the people of God in the Promised Land, and from there expand out to the Son of God whom David foreshadowed. But don't change the meanings of words to conform to your own "wish list" from God as if he were concerned about the little problems of your life. As Jesus told us, our Father knows we need the necessities of life, and he'll take care of them; you concern yourself with his Kingdom. (Matthew 6:25-33)
- *Second*, the Psalms focus on the issues that the King of Israel considered crucial for the people of God. Memorize David's 5-Point Plan, write it down and put it beside your Bible when you work through the Psalms. Go back through the history of David in 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles and study what it was that David set up; it's all there, the sequential steps that he took to pull the nation together. This is what was on his heart when he wrote the Psalms, when he led all of Israel in their worship of God. He knew their life with God was based on these issues.
- *Third*, use the meanings that David and the other authors would have understood. David and the Israelites had 500 years of significant history behind them, already written down in Moses' books and others. They understood the fact that they were at a high point in the history of God's people – the fulfillment of centuries of hard work and faith and hope – and their work would form another key link for future generations. We can't read Psalms and ignore Old Testament history.
- *Fourth*, watch Jesus and the Apostles as they handle the Psalms and their themes. In the middle of Sadducees, Pharisees, and teachers of the Law, who were pretty much clueless about how to correctly interpret the Old Testament, Jesus went straight to the point. There were numerous occasions where he showed the ignorance of the leaders concerning David and his Kingdom principles. The Apostles focused on the same issues that David did, even if they didn't explicitly mention David, because they recognized the importance of that kind of worship for the life of the Church.
- *Fifth*, compare the worship that David gave us in the Psalms with worship in today's churches. The two don't even compare. Today's worship is celebration, the love of God, emotions, and absolutely no content behind the religious words used.⁴ There are no enemies, there is no agenda, worship is by man's rule and not God's (which is extremely dangerous – see Leviticus 10), and just about everything is man-centered. On the other hand, if someone

⁴ Years ago a pastor in a Pentecostal church in South America (with services filled with the chanting of "Praise God!") suddenly stopped and asked himself, "What are we praising God *for*?" Answering that simple question changed his whole ministry.

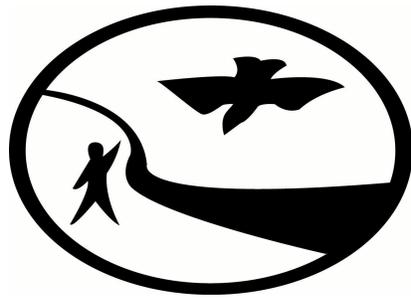
would actually introduce the concepts of Psalms into the church service, no doubt most of the people would leave – either they would find it too harsh for a “loving God,” or they wouldn’t understand any of it.

The point here is that someone who knew God deeply, who loved God and his Kingdom passionately, who was in the perfect position to implement the will of God and the resources of Heaven, took hold of his task and succeeded where so many others have failed. There’s only one way to do this – and David showed us the way.

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