

Introduction to the Psalms

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[0:00] So what are Psalms? We have this book right in the middle of our Bibles.

The way to find the Psalms are right in the middle of the Bible. If you have a pointed version, it doesn't quite work with electronic versions I suppose. What are Psalms?

Well, there's an interesting verse in 1 Chronicles chapter 25. I put it up on the screen there for you. And it says that David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun, for the ministry of prophesying accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals.

Quite an interesting verse really. Seems that David's kingdom must have been organized something like a military government, at least the commanders of the army had a say in this. It says that the Psalms or the singing was accompanied. So where this idea some people have that you should sing Psalms unaccompanied, I don't quite know because it does say they were accompanied by harps and lyres and interestingly symbols.

[1:18] So there is scriptural justification for percussion. Because they had stringed instruments but also percussion instruments.

But most importantly we have in the middle of there, it says what they were to do. They were set apart for what? For the ministry of prophesying accompanied by the harps and so on.

What are the Psalms then? The prophecies, the word of God set to music. The collection of Psalms as we have them today were really put together in the final version quite late, probably around the 3rd century BC.

But many are clearly of much older origin. What we call the book of Psalms is actually divided into five in the Hebrews, five books in the Hebrew.

I put what they are up on the screen there. I won't read what they are but the numbers are up on the screen there if you want to see. Those divisions are in the Hebrew text.

[2:27] Some of the older English translations don't have those divisions in but they are actually in the Hebrew text. And the modern translations tend to put them in.

So, it's a collection of songs divided into these five books. Who are they written by? Well, quite a lot of people.

Some of the authors that are listed, and again the headings of the Psalms are part of the scriptural text, not the sort of headlines that sometimes the New International Version puts in.

But when it says in your, it says Psalm, whatever it is, underneath there's a title and that title is part of the scriptural text. And it lists, sometimes gives the authors.

A lot of them are attributed to David. And there are Psalms of Asaph, Psalms of the sons of Korah. Two are attributed to Solomon.

[3:30] Only two, surprisingly. There is one only that's attributed to Moses. An awful lot of them are by that well-known author Anonymous or Anon.

There is no author given. We need to be a bit careful about these attributions, in fact. Who were these sons of Korah and who was Asaph?

The sons of Korah, in fact, was a Levite clan. Asaph was contemporary of David. But many of the Psalms that are attributed to the sons of Korah, particularly the Psalms of Asaph, actually contain historical references, which suggests they are actually written rather later than the time of David.

So how are we to make sense of that? Well, it's generally accepted that, in fact, that Asaph and the sons of Korah were, in fact, choirs or music schools which were attached to the temple.

And this is kind of suggested in that Chronicles reference that we had, that Asaph set up a music school. And it seems that the sons of Korah, which are also mentioned sometimes in the historical books, were also a music school.

[4:49] So there seemed to have been two choirs or music schools attached to the tabernacle and temple worship. And when it says Asaph or the psalm of Asaph or the sons of Korah, it appears to mean that they come from, they were written by those schools rather than by Asaph or Korah himself, the sons of Korah themselves, the direct sons of Korah.

Psalms 77, for instance, says, For the director of music for Jeduthin of Asaph, a psalm. So Jeduthin, who again was mentioned in that Chronicles verse, appears to have been some sort of choir master or musical director or something like that.

In modern terms, he might have called him a worship leader, perhaps. But it does seem, when it says a psalm of Asaph, it probably doesn't mean that it was written by Asaph himself, but it came from the Asaph school.

Now what about the psalms of David then? Is it possible that the psalms of David are not actually written by David? Well, of course it is possible, but the historical references in the psalms attributed to David do seem to be quite specifically to those of David's time.

And sometimes they're given quite specific historical references. So it seems likely, it's probably more likely that David, the psalms of David were written by David himself.

[6:29] I don't think one could be absolutely certain about this, but it seems sensible to assume that the psalms of David were written by David himself. So that gives you some idea of what they are and who wrote them.

All the psalms are songs, of course. Sometimes they're explicitly described as such, a song. The psalms often have more specific descriptions.

Some of them are called psalms. Some of them are called mictams. Some of them are called mascils. Unfortunately, the precise meanings of these literary terms have been lost.

And so we're not entirely sure what the difference between a psalm or a mictam or a mascil is.

Notwithstanding that, I have tried to take different examples of these in the studies that we're going to be doing later on.

And so while I can't tell you exactly what a mictam or a mascil is, we are going to be looking at a mictam and a mascil later on in our studies. But fundamentally, of course, they are songs.

[7:47] Hebrew, if you've ever heard the psalms sung in Hebrew, Hebrew is a great language for singing, really. It has a great assonant language. If you ever have a chance to hear the Chichester psalms set by Leonard Bernstein, for instance, sung in Hebrew, they really are very impressive.

Even if, like me, you don't speak really a word of Hebrew, don't understand them, but just the sound of them is very impressive in the Hebrew. They are songs, and they're well worth a listen.

Say if you can, sometimes hear them in Hebrew. And the titles not only often specify what sort of a song they are and who wrote them, but often specify a tune.

And these tunes actually have rather evocative names. The Doe of the Morning, just to say that, and you imagine this deer sort of appearing with the dawn.

Well, the lily of the covenant. Don't exactly know why the covenant had a lily, but obviously this was some symbol of the covenant. In a lily, a beautiful flower had the lily.

[9:06] Another tune, a more interesting title of Do Not Destroy. It seems like something you put at the end of official, top of official documents, isn't it? But it presumably doesn't mean that.

It's presumably a plea for mercy, for the Lord would not destroy or come in judgment. But, again, these tunes have been lost.

So I always think it's rather a pity, but perhaps, well, in God's providence, he did not preserve the music. And perhaps that's just as well, because it means we can reset them in a musical language which speaks to us.

These tunes probably would have been in a musical idiom that was unfamiliar to us. And perhaps we can use a musical idiom which we understand.

But it is important to remember that they are songs, they are intended to be sung. They're not prose, they're not even poetry. We read them out or read them together, and I'm sure that's a good

thing to do.

[10:15] But when we do that, we're not actually using the way they were intended. They were intended to be sung. And so I'm going to try and make sure that we do sing them and that's that's how, this is how they really intended to be used.

They are the words of God, they are prophecy set to music. So we will study them as scripture and we'll look at them in the same way as we might look at any passage of scripture, but we do need, I say, to keep in mind that they are songs, they are sung.

Now most of the first book of Psalms are Psalms of David, but these first two really form prologue, not just to the first book of Psalms, but to the whole collection of Psalms really.

Because in these first two Psalms the ideas and the themes of the whole book or the whole collection are introduced. And we can think of Psalm 1 as telling us the source of true blessing, in other words, where should we be looking if we want to find blessing, we want to find satisfaction. And Psalm 2 introduces the idea of the anointed king and the kingdom of heaven. So let's look at those Psalms too.

[11:40] It's quite briefly, I'm not going to expound them verse by verse in great detail, but just look at the at what these two Psalms tell you. Now Psalm 1 is expressed in terms of the wicked and the ungodly and blessing of those who take delight in the law of the Lord.

In other words, seekers in wisdom as we might say. But although these are not the categories in which the Psalm is expressed, I'd like to perhaps interpret this Psalm to you or bring it to you up in a modern idiom as it were, to say it tells us something about identity, in other words, the question who are you?

And it has something to say about freedom. And I'd like to look at it from those points of view.

Because those are things that are very important to people in this modern world.

We live in a complicated world, a world in which nothing is quite as it should be. And we want to know how we can find, well, I'll say blessing, perhaps blessing isn't a word in common use nowadays, but we want to find satisfaction.

We want to find stability. We want to find meaning. And our modern world often interprets that in terms of this word identity.

[13:11] In fact, it's not going too far to say our society is almost obsessed with this idea of identity. What is identity?

Well, identity is the narrative we tell about ourselves. It's the answer to the question, who are you?

So if I greeted you at the door or something and said, hello, come in, who are you?

You might just give your name, but you might say a bit more than that. You might introduce yourself or you might say, I'm a plumber. or you might think, come in and say, oh, I'm a feminist.

Or we might answer in a slightly different sense. We might say, I see myself as a risk taker, an entrepreneur. We all have an answer or we try to answer for ourselves that question, don't we?

Who am I? Who are you? Let me read to you from Mark chapter 1 just a couple of verses. You can look it up if you like, but it's quite short.

[14:19] I'll read it to you. As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.

Come follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. But once they left their nets and followed him.

Up to that point, if you'd asked Simon and Andrew who they were, they might well have said, we're in the fishing business. We're fishermen. What Jesus is offering them here is not just a change of job, is it?

It's actually a change of identity. They were fishermen. That was their trade. That was how they thought of themselves. But now they're going to be disciples, apprentice apostles, trainee evangelists.

It's not just a change of job that Jesus was offering them. It was a change of identity. What they thought they were about, what their life was about, was going to change.

[15:31] And as I said, our modern society takes this question of identity very seriously. You can be whoever you think you are, whoever you want to

be. That's what our society tells us nowadays, isn't it?

Do you know there's a Norwegian woman who thinks she should have been born as a cat? That's a rather extreme example and so far that's a bit beyond medical science.

I don't think it's possible to have yourself transplanted into the body of a cat. But if possible, as far as this world is concerned, if reality doesn't match our self-image, and it's not our self-image that should be adjusted, it's reality.

Previous ideas probably would have dismissed this idea as madness. They maintained at least the fiction that they were living in the real world, although often it was a fiction.

But nowadays our society finds even that restriction too severe. If we can't do it by cosmetic surgery, then virtual reality will come to our aid.

[16:46] Nowadays we're not even going to be constrained by the constraints of biology or physics or the real world. We will be apparently whoever we want to be.

Actually, though, this isn't really a new idea. It really was a fiction, really, that people lived in the real world even in the past. because humans have always wanted to reinvent themselves in their own image, shouldn't they?

In fact, wasn't that exactly what Adam and Eve did in the garden? They wanted to be wise like gods. That was the attraction of the tree.

They would become like God, knowing good and evil. In other words, they would determine for themselves who they were, what is good and what is evil. They would have their own identity, not one reflecting the image of God.

God will not tell me what to do. People have always said, I want to be free. And that brings us back perhaps to Psalm 1.

[17:57] Who do you identify with? We use the phrase that way as well, don't we? We identify with a character perhaps in a drama or a play or something like that.

We say, yeah, I feel that person. I could be that person. I feel like that person. The person I could model myself on. Well, who will you identify yourself with?

Psalm 1 talks about those who identify themselves with the mockers, the scoffers, those who say, I don't care about God's word.

I don't care about God's law. I'm going to go my own way. It's stupid. It's impossibly restrictive. It's outmoded. But the psalmist wants to come give you a warning and say that this is a very bad identity choice, a very bad role model.

And to make his point, the psalmist gives us this horticultural comparison in verses 3 and 4, doesn't he? And although he doesn't ask exactly this question, we could ask the question here, which of these horticultural examples is truly free?

[19:18] Is it the tree? Or is it the chaff? Chaff, if you don't know what it is, the husk left when the grain has been removed. in those days, they would have beat the grain to get the corn out and then thrown it up in the air and the wind would blow the chaff away.

Which of those is truly free? Well, our modern word would have to answer the chaff, wouldn't it? in the way that we see freedom nowadays, it has no attachments at all.

It can go wherever it wishes. But the tree, on the other hand, is deeply rooted, isn't it, in the soil by the stream. That tree isn't going anywhere.

It can be nothing other than a tree. But the psalm tells us, points out to us really, doesn't it?

What an absurd argument this is. It would be very foolish for the tree to want to be somewhere else. It's already ideally located for a tree.

[20:34] It's free to do what trees do. It's free to be a tree. It puts forth its leaves to absorb the sunlight. It fixes carbon dioxide and nutrients and it converts them into fruit.

Brings forth fruit. That is what is true freedom for a tree. To be planted by the water. To bring forth fruit.

And what's the freedom that the chaff has, by contrast? It's unsubstantial, isn't it? It's meaningless. It's shriveled up. It's pointless.

And a breath of wind and it's gone. Never to be seen or thought of again. That's the warning the psalm gives us. If you want to be detached from everything, if you want to be completely free, if you want to say I'll be whoever I want to be, then you condemn yourself to an identity that is insubstantial, meaningless.

And in the end it goes nowhere. It just blows away. If you want to be truly human, if you want to have real meaning, if you want to have an identity that is substantial, not a phantasm, then we need to root it in God's word.

[22:03] Deuteronomy 8, verse 3 says, man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. If we identify ourselves with the people of God, those who learn from God's word, then we can be truly free.

But of course it is your choice. You can take it or you can leave it. The psalmist warns us that if you leave it the consequences will not be good.

But the Lord knows those who are righteous. The Lord knows those who are his. But if you turn away, then do not expect him to acknowledge you.

So if we just had Psalm 1, we might think that what is being presented here is a philosophy of life, a set of rules perhaps, the law of the Lord.

But that isn't the whole story. It does tell us a way to live through the ups and downs of life, but actually it has something much more profound even than that to say.

[23:20] Because the book of Psalms points us to the king. and so we have not just Psalm 1 but Psalm 2 also. Now at first sight this psalm might seem quite different.

It's expressed, isn't it, in terms of kings and politics. but if you look closer you find that in fact there are rather similar themes in these two psalms.

In Psalm 1 we met the wicked, as it were, those who scoff, who won't have anything to do with God's law. And in Psalm 2 we find that not just the man as we might say on the Bethel omnibus or whatever, but the kings and rulers have very much the same attitude.

Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters. That sounds good, doesn't it? Yeah, that's exactly what we want to do.

That sounds like a cry for freedom, an escape from tyranny, but actually it's not. It's nothing of the sort.

[24:40] in fact, it's a declaration of rebellion. And even if we're not kings or rulers, we share in that rebellion.

All of us naturally seek to turn against God and his wise rule. All of us want to be our own king. All of us want to be do-it-yourself gods.

God is foolish. But it is a foolish and it's a deadly desire. Psalm 1 tells us that that makes us insubstantial, it makes us weightless, it makes us meaningless.

And Psalm 2 goes even further than that. It says the end of it will be your destruction. The end of it will be judgment, that God will say, no, I'm not interested in that, there is only one God, you can't be your own God.

And so the end of it will be destruction. But Psalm 2 actually ends, so I'll tell you though the themes in some ways of the two Psalms are similar, Psalm 2 adds a new element to the mix.

[25:51] How do we know that this rebellion is futile? Well, verse 6 tells us, doesn't it? There is a king in Zion, which is how we know.

Who was this king? Well, maybe initially this Psalm referred to David or Solomon, but neither of them fulfilled verses 7 to 9. Not even Solomon, who, at the time of Solomon was the greatest extent of the kingdom, but in no way could you say that Solomon ruled to the ends of the earth.

Of course he didn't. And yet this king that the Psalmist talks of, will rule from pole to pole from east to west to the ends of the earth. This prophecy is not fulfilled by David or Solomon or any other king, but by the Lord Jesus, the king who does indeed rule to the ends of the earth.

And Paul makes the point, in case you think I'm making this up, Paul is quite clear on the point, preaching to Jews in Pisidian Antioch. He says the following, Acts 13, this is, 32 to 38.

We tell you the good news, what God promised our fathers, he's referring back to the promise of a king, what God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.

[27:22] as it is written in the second psalm, you are my son, today I have become your father. The son, the king, that Psalm 2 talks about, is none other than the Lord Jesus himself.

Reading on with Paul's sermon, the fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words, I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.

This is David's greater son. So as is stated elsewhere, you will not let your holy one see decay. For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep.

He was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

That's how Paul finished his sermon. I would like to finish in a similar way. Jesus is the anointed king who inherits the promises.

[28:34] Jesus is the true son, the one who God acknowledges as his son. So today, I have begotten you.

Of course, we know that Jesus was begotten from eternity, but he was acknowledged as the son. It is baptism. This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

Jesus is the true son, the anointed king, the one who really inherits that promise. Ask of me and I will make the rulers of the earth your inheritance.

So what advice does the psalmist give us? We find it, don't we, in verse 12. We're exhorted to kiss the son.

These rulers are told to kiss the son. What does that mean? Well, it means, of course, a kiss, a fealty, a swearing of allegiance, of acknowledging that this king is the true ruler, the king of kings.

[29:44] The kiss is one of submission to God's appointed king. And what are those rulers told? Well, if you don't do that, then all your empire building plans will be destroyed, just as the chaff of Psalm 1 is blown away in a minute.

So all these great plans of the rulers will be destroyed and blown away, never to be remembered. Notice the last sentence of Psalm 2.

You might think, as I said, it doesn't really apply to me because I'm not a king or a ruler, but actually it does because the last sentence of Psalm 2 finishes with a blessing, just as Psalm 1 started with a blessing, it finishes with the same blessing really.

This is not just for kings and rulers, we all share in the rebellion, so the command and promise of verse 12 applies to all of us. Blessed are those who take refuge in him.

And we're not to receive that command of verse 12 lightly. Notice this, fear and trembling are involved. This is not a judge or a king who is going to tolerate anything, who doesn't really care what his people do.

[31:09] Fear and trembling are required. You should kiss the son with fear and with trembling, with, you really mean it, you know, not just, yeah, yeah, I would acknowledge Jesus as king, but not going to do anything about it, it's not going to make any difference.

No, it should be taken seriously. This king will deal out destruction and judgment, and yet we notice that the submission to this king is not the submission of despair, it's not the acknowledging of final defeat and hopelessness, which is the fate of the chaff, which is the fate of the kings who try and throw off the rule of God.

In fact, it's a matter of joy. What is promised is a blessing, a hope, a life like that tree, which has meaning and fulfillment.

Not the freedom of the chaff, which is so free that it's blown away in a moment. Not that mirage of political and moral independence, which in the end just becomes slavery by another name.

That's how Jesus describes it, slavery to the authorities, the powers of this world, the prince of this world. That's not freedom at all. true freedom is that freedom of the tree planted by the water side, the one who submits to the Lord Jesus, the one who is deeply rooted in his word and the teachings of the scripture.

[32:53] That is the one who has true meaning in his life, the true identity that is substantial, so the rest of the psalms actually explore a lot of these ideas, they explore that fear and that trembling, but also

they explore that hope.

We're going to be looking in the weeks to come at some of the other psalms, and try to pick some less well-known ones to look at.

But we will find that these ideas, these themes of psalms one and two, pop up and explored in more detail. But let's finish the way the psalm two finishes, with that warning, warning to us, to all of us, not just to the rulers, but to all of us.

Kiss the son, lest he be angry, and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge refuge in him.

So that's my invitation tonight, to take refuge in him. So, we're going to sing again, sing a hymn, not one of the psalms this time, although it is loosely based on a psalm, Psalm 77, I think.

[34:21] but it acknowledges the anointed king. Then we'll turn to communion, we'll try and get things ready fairly quickly, just have a brief break while the communion things are set out after this hymn, then we'll turn to communion, you've got me again for that.

What was I going to say? Oh yes, I was going to say that all who acknowledge the rule of the Lord Jesus' communion will be in the communion.