

# THE PSALMS

## INTRODUCTION

### TITLE OF THE BOOK

- 1) "Psalms" is a Greek word. It means: songs accompanied by stringed instruments.
- 2) "Psalter" is also a Greek term. It means: The stringed instrument itself, probably a lyre (1 Samuel 16: 14-23)

Thus, the Psalms have been written to be sung, and sung for corporate worship. Thus, it is also appropriate that the church has used the Psalms as lyrics for hymns as well as liturgy for recitation responsively.

The churches of the Reformation laid special claim to the Psalms, giving them a special place in private devotion and public worship. For generations, Psalms, in metrical form, were the only musical response in the worship life of Presbyterian congregations. More recently, to musical response has been added responsive reading of the Psalms.

The Psalter contains a wide variety of Psalms. Yet it is dominated by prayers that complain to God about specific dire situations of an individual or group. This may seem puzzling at first since a popular title for Psalms in Hebrew is *Tehillim* (Praises). Apparently, all the Psalms, even those filled with raw anger and discontent, are understood as instruments of praise. This is not meant to dull the sharper edges of the Psalms' expression, but rather, to recognize that every address to God, even those of anger, sorrow or discontent, are rooted in a faith/trust in God.

### THE NATURE OF PRAYER IN THE PSALMS

In addition to providing vocabulary for liturgical prayers (i.e. Calls to Worship Prayers of Confession, Responsive Readings, etc), the Psalms have been used as models for Christian Prayer.

- 1) Psalms are not intended to be prayed just individually or in isolation. When an individual addresses God in the Psalms, they pray from their own heart, but also from within a congregation or on behalf of a group.
- 2) Many Psalms are spoken from within depths of personal and corporate suffering, oppression and persecution. When we who are distant from such personal experiences use them, we are also praying in solidarity with all who suffer in the world.
- 3) Psalms communicate the deepest feelings of the heart. They communicate anger, sadness, desolation, supplication and need, but also joy, praise, thanksgiving, faith, hope and love.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALMS

There are 150 psalms in the Psalter. Many of them are organized in collections that bear the name of figures associated with the worship of Israel (David, Korah, Asaph). The Psalter, then, is a collection of collections, along with additional, untitled Psalms existing independently of a collection and incorporated in the Psalter.

Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106 end in similar doxological formulas including the word: Amen. These lines help divide the Psalter into 5 sections or "books."

1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150 are the 5 sections with 150 serving as a final doxology for the whole collection. The 5-fold division is meant to imitate the "Torah" (first 5 books of the Old Testament known as the 5 books of Moses). Psalms 1-2 are an introduction and offer guidance on how to read the whole Psalter. "Happy is...." (1:1, 2:12) describes the righteous person, and invites all readers to live in ways that will characterize them as happy or blessed.

## THE THEOLOGY OF THE PSALMS

There is no systematic theology of the Psalms, but some recurring themes include the following:

- 1) A central claim of the Psalms is that "The Lord reigns" and "King" is a prominent metaphor for God. Other roles of God include: warrior, judge, saviour, shepherd, refuge, creator. All of these metaphors are understood as part of the larger metaphor of God as King. The prophetic element in this is that if God is King, then any human King derives their authority from God and is subject to God. This is meant to be a check on all human pretensions to power. If God is king then God is also protector of the weak and vulnerable, and the powerful are accountable to God for their care.
- 2) The Lord reigns from Mount Zion, the capital – 46:4-7, 48:1-3, 76:1-3, 122:3-5. From here God issues decrees, commands and statutes called "Torah" (defined as God's "law", "Instruction" or "teaching").
- 3) On Zion God establishes the Davidic King who is God's representative to Israel and to the nations – 2:6.
- 4) The primary duty of human beings is to submit to God's rule (5:2), to depend on God's protection (118:8-9), meditate on the Torah (1:1-2), and follow the leadership of God's anointed (2:1-2).
- 5) The righteous adhere to these requirements but the wicked do not. There is sometimes the complaint that the wicked prosper and oppress without being judged. But there is also the affirmation of faith that in the end, the way of the wicked will lead to ruin (73).