

# TYPES OF PSALMS

## INTRODUCTION

There are different types of psalms and they serve different purposes in the worship life of Israel.

Can we imagine a worship service without hymns or prayers? Or can we imagine a Christmas Eve service with the Hymn: "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" or a hymn before baptism: "Break Thou the Bread of Life"? Clearly the answer is no. Just as our hymns and prayers are intended for particular times and occasions in worship, so the psalms are composed for certain times and seasons in the worship life of Israel. One of the ongoing challenges in interpreting the psalms is to discover the situations in Israel's worship that create the context for specific psalms.

## USE OF PSALMS

How were psalms used and for what occasions? We have to discern literary form, genre, language, structure and movement in the psalm. Does the psalm begin with a cry for help, an invitation to praise God, or a complaint? Is it spoken by an individual or a group? Does the psalm end in despair or hope? What problems does the psalm seem to be describing?

Such questions have helped scholars classify the psalms. Each classification reflects a distinct human response to God. Prayers at a funeral are different than prayers at the birth of a child. The address to God is sometimes a cry for help, a complaint, praise, or a call for justice.

### 1) PRAYER FOR HELP OF AN INDIVIDUAL

The most common type of psalm is that of an individual's lament. (e.g. 7:1ff) A situation of trouble is often described, (e.g. 22:12-13) and requests for help often include a justification for the plea – I am innocent, I am free from guilt, I do not deserve this suffering, etc. (e.g. 17:1ff)

These prayers are grounded in trust and faith, and they frequently move from complaint and petition to a statement of confident assurance that God will act and answer the prayer. E.g. ps. 12 begins with a desperate cry and ends with calm assurance.

What are the situations of trouble in such psalms? Psalm 38, for example suggests sickness as the trouble, psalm 3 as armed conflict, and psalm 26 as an accusation of some crime and the person praying declaring their innocence.

### 2) THANKSGIVING SONG OF AN INDIVIDUAL

If the situation of a lament psalm is some kind of trouble for which an individual worshipper asks for deliverance, then this type of psalm reflects the experience of help

having arrived. This type of psalm praises God for divine deliverance, salvation or a positive response to the needs of the person praying. Psalms 30, 116 are excellent examples.

These psalms are like public testimonials of individuals used to encourage others in a worship service. E.g. 30:4 – moves from personal testimony to encouragement of the congregation to “sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name.” Such psalms could also have accompanied a thanksgiving offering (116:17). They are also communal, even when it is something like a recovery of illness that is celebrated in a public, formal way in song and ceremony (116:8-11).

### 3) CORPORATE PRAYER FOR HELP

This type of psalm is the community's counterpart to the prayer for help of an individual. These are prayers that arise when disaster strikes the nation. They are pleas for God to rescue. They are urgent petitions for God to hear and help (e.g. 80:1-2).

These psalms typically contain 3 elements: a) a description of trouble (e.g.79:1); b) an assertion of trust in the Lord (e.g. 74:12-17); c) a recollection of God's saving deeds in the past, intended to motivate and encourage God to act now (e.g.74:23). Excellent examples of such psalms include: 44, 74, 79, 80, 83.

### 4) THE HYMN

A psalm hymn complements corporate prayers for help. They typically have 2 elements: a) an invitation to praise God followed by: b) a statement of motivation for praising God.

Invitations contain a variety of expressions calling on the community to lift up its voice in adoration of God. Sometimes “Hallelujah” is used (e.g. 146-150), which means praise + “jah” or “yah” which is an abbreviated form for Yahweh or the Lord (personal name for God in Old Testament). Other examples of invitations include: “Give thanks to the Lord” (107:1, 118:1), “O come let us sing to the Lord” (95:1), “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth” (100:1). Invitations are followed by motivations. 95:1-3 is a good example. Why sing to the Lord and come into God's presence with thanksgiving? Because “The Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.”

Such psalms would have been performed at Israel's yearly festivals (Deuteronomy 16:16-17). Examples of such psalms include: 29, 47, 106, 107, 118.

### 5) PSALMS OF INSTRUCTION

There was common interest in Israel to teach and learn the right way of life and the right way to worship. The main goal was to motivate the righteous to live the right way (e.g. 34, 37, 49) and to teach the benefits of adhering to God's “Torah” or law (1, 19, 119). There was a time when much teaching was done through the language of prayer and praise.

One characteristic quality of such psalms is the use of the Hebrew alphabet to outline a psalm. Such psalms are known as "acrostics." Each line or section of the psalm begins with a word that starts with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet until the whole alphabet is covered. This cannot be detected in translation, but the clear intention to teach is evident. Examples of acrostic psalms of instruction include: 9-10, 25, 33, 111-112, 119, 145.

Some of these types of psalms contain beatitudes characterized by expressions such as "Blessed" "Happy" or "Fortunate" are those who.... Some are composites of different types of psalms (e.g. 19, 33, 119). Some make allusions to others passages in the bible (e.g. 103, 145). 103: 15-16, for example, is very similar to Isaiah 40: 6-8. Some emphasize topics such as the benefits of the Torah (1,19,119) or the final downfall of the wicked (37,49,73).

#### 6) OTHER TYPES OF PSALMS

Many psalms fit none of these categories exactly. Some revolve around hopes for a Davidic King. They celebrate his victories and lament his defeats (e.g. 2, 45, 72, 89, 110).

Categories suggest that there is a structure, a well-known genre in prayer and worship. Completely unique, unrehearsed prayers are rare. Spontaneous songs are even more rare.

What are our prayers and hymns in worship? Where do they fit and what purpose do they fulfill?