

Introduction

- † As a young man, I wrote my share of sappy love songs, but I am not a poet, and – though I have read that poetry was mastered as an art form long before prose – I struggle to understand poems when I read them. I love the rhythm and structure of poetry, but I get lost in the figurative language, and this is worse in the Psalms than for most poetry, because there usually is a prophetic aspect I don't understand or a historical aspect I don't understand or both.
- † However, I recently read a delightful book on the Psalms [Ron Allen's *And I Will Praise Him*], listened to teachings on the Psalms, and studied the Psalms, and I have learned how to understand them better and thus have gained a great appreciation for them.
- † Today, I want to share some of the things I have learned, in hope that you too will gain in your understanding and appreciation of the Psalms, which are an important part of God's Word to us.

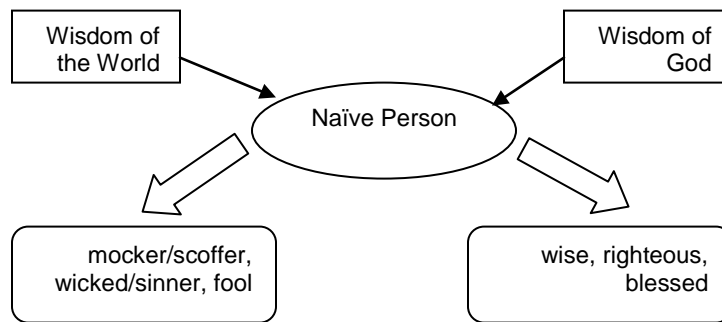
Parallelism

- † The standard Hebrew title for the Psalms means "praises." But the word "Psalms" comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and essentially means "sacred songs sung to musical accompaniment."
- † Do you know what makes them poetry and not just songs of praise? I mean, they don't rhyme – not even in Hebrew! – and they don't seem to have rhythm, so what makes them poems? The answer is parallelism: the poem is mostly made up of couplets in which the second line relates to the first in some way, and which might relate to other contiguous couplets.
- † For example the second line might say the same thing as the first but in different words, such as Psalm 2:1: Why are the nations in an uproar // and the peoples devising a vain thing?
- † or the second might build on the first, like Psalm 95:6: Come let us worship and bow down // Let us kneel before Yahweh our maker.
- † the second might build on the first, even using some of the same language, like Psalm 96:7: Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of the mighty // Ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.
- † or the second might explain the first, like Psalm 42:1: As the deer pants for the water brooks // So my soul pants for you, O God.
- † the second might offer a contrast to the first such as Psalm 1:6: For Yahweh knows the way of the righteous // But the way of the wicked will perish.
- † Understanding the Hebrew use of parallelism not only increases our appreciation of the beauty and complexity of the structure of the Psalms, it also helps us interpret them. For example, let's look at Psalm 13:
 - 1 How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
 - 2 How long shall I take counsel in my soul,
{Having} sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?
 - 3 Consider {and} answer me, O LORD my God;
Enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the {sleep of} death,
 - 4 And my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
{And} my adversaries will rejoice when I am shaken.
 - 5 But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness;
My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation.
 - 6 I will sing to the LORD,
Because He has dealt bountifully with me.
- † To understand v.1, we can look at what comes next, for the couplets are related through parallelism: the second half of v.1 and then v.2 makes clear that the problem is that the author is not hearing from God, is not receiving God's provision yet, not that God has literally forgotten him.

Characters

† Another thing that helps us understand the Psalms is to realize there is a regular cast of characters. In Proverbs, the writer was trying to sway the naïve [empty headed] person to adopt the revelation of God, and thus become wise. The alternative was to reject the revelation of God and adopt the wisdom of the world, and thus become a fool [cf. James 3].

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† In the Psalms, the writer has adopted the revelation of God, and so is righteous. Often, he is the king, God's representative on Earth, and thus his enemies are the same as God's enemies.

† In the Psalms, he often is evaluating the evidence that the wicked are prospering at his expense, and yet he is maintaining his faith in God to deliver him.

† Another theme in the Psalms is pure praise, as the author [having been delivered, perhaps] notes the attributes, revelation, and works of God as praiseworthy.

† It is important to understand that the identity of the characters in the Psalms is based on this choice of whether to adopt God's revelation or the wisdom of the world, else you might mistake what makes a person in a psalm righteous or not.

† For an illustration of these characters in a psalm, let's look at Psalm 1:

- 1 How **blessed** is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the **wicked**,
Nor stand in the path of **sinners**,
Nor sit in the seat of **scoffers**!
- 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
- 3 He will be like a tree {firmly} planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.
- 4 The **wicked** are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
- 5 Therefore the **wicked** will not stand in the judgment,
Nor **sinners** in the assembly of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the **righteous**,
But the way of the **wicked** will perish.

† In this psalm we see the contrast provided for us: the blessed is the one who delights and dwells in the revelation of God and is thus righteous, while the wicked, sinning, scoffer does not.

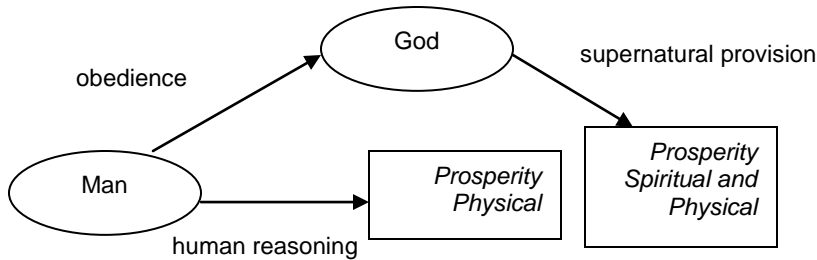
† Furthermore, the blessed is promised prosperity from God, while the wicked is promised death.

† Throughout the Psalms, the poems emphasize this contrast between the characteristics and the fortunes of those who adopt God's revelation and those who reject it.

Prosperity

† There are two methods these characters take to seek prosperity. The righteous and wise one obeys God's covenant and seeks his supernatural provision, but the wicked and foolish one relies on human reasoning to achieve prosperity on his own.

- † In the Psalms, there is evidence that at least for a time, the wicked can achieve prosperity in the physical sense, but only the righteous will be vindicated, achieving spiritual blessing as well as deliverance from problems and the promised blessing of prosperity, though this is sometimes delayed for God's reasons.
- † Use Chart



- † Let's look at Psalm 2 for an illustration:
 - 1 **Why are the nations in an uproar
And the peoples devising a vain thing?**
 - 2 **The kings of the earth take their stand
And the rulers take counsel together
Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying,**
 - 3 **"Let us tear their fetters apart
And cast away their cords from us!"**
 - 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them.
 - 5 Then He will speak to them in His anger
And terrify them in His fury, saying,
 - 6 "But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain."
 - 7 "I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to Me, 'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.
 - 8 'Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,
And the {very} ends of the earth as Your possession.
 - 9 'You shall break them with a rod of iron,
You shall shatter them like earthenware.'"
 - 10 **Now therefore, O kings, show discernment;
Take warning, O judges of the earth.**
 - 11 **Worship the LORD with reverence
And rejoice with trembling.**
 - 12 **Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, and you perish {in} the way,
For His wrath may soon be kindled.
How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!**
- † The middle portion of this psalm has important meaning both because it is a messianic prophecy and because it illustrates the representation of God by the Davidic Kings prior to Christ, but we will discuss that a little later.
- † To see the difference in the methods of prosperity let's look at the first three verses and the last three. In the first three verses, we see that the gentile peoples were rejecting God's authority. They were declining to obey God's covenant and trust in his provision, choosing instead to go their own way [the classic story of the human race!].
- † In the last three verses, the author admonishes them to take warning, to discern wisdom, and thus to return to acknowledging God's authority, else they will perish. In contrast, the one who takes refuge in God – who trusts in his provision for success – will be blessed.

Judgment

- † We said earlier that the author of the Psalms often was God's representative, who was witnessing the wicked prosper at his expense. He has believed God's revelation and has acted on it, drawing attacks from the wicked. He thus calls for God's judgment [deliverance]. There are two issues with this.
- † First, we must ask, how can this be righteous to call for judgment on others? Let's look at Psalm 137 as an example:
- 1 By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
 - 2 Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
 - 3 For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, {saying,}
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
 - 4 How can we sing the LORD'S song
In a foreign land?
 - 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
May my right hand forget {her skill.}
 - 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you,
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.
 - 7 Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom
The day of Jerusalem,
Who said, "Raze it, raze it
To its very foundation."
 - 8 O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one,
How blessed will be the one who repays you
With the recompense with which you have repaid us.
 - 9 How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones
Against the rock.
- † That seems pretty harsh, doesn't it? Some people might claim this psalm shows a merciless character in the author. However, what the author is looking forward to is judgment of God's enemies, not judgment of the author's enemies. As the author is one of the exiled Hebrews, his enemies are the same as God's enemies, but his motivation is to see justice done, not to exact his own personal revenge.
- † Another thought to consider is that the author of the psalm was inspired by God to write this psalm. While it is true that *characters* express wrong thinking and do wrong things in the Bible's narratives, the *authors* would never express wrong thinking if they were inspired as we believe they were.
- † Some might question God's mercy if this is inspired writing, but we must remember that God's holiness demands justice, which entails judgment for those who are not righteous. In his mercy, God has provided a way out of eternal condemnation through Christ's sacrifice, but the Babylonians would not avail themselves of this safe harbor, for they would not look to God in faith, would not trust in his provision or trust him enough to obey. They proved themselves enemies of God, not only in their own lack of relationship with him, but by abusing God's chosen representatives, his people.
- † Vv.8-9 look forward to God's judgment of his enemies [those who have rejected his revelation], specifically, in these verses, those who had conquered and exiled his people. V.9 suggests this judgment will include the little children. The vivid image of dashing them against the rock is symbolic for the extinguishment of life, both earthly and spiritually [eternal condemnation]. The one who will be blessed to do this judgment is Jesus, God the Son, to whom falls the role of judge for all peoples.
- † The second issue is that there is often a wait. We certainly see that in this psalm, that the people are suffering in exile, hoping God will respond to their repentant pleas for help. However, God acts in his timing, not the writer's. Faith allows him to wait for God's implementation of his promise.

- † For us, the situation is similar in that if we accept God’s revelation and act on it then we will be attacked by the wicked. We can call out in our prayers for judgment/deliverance, but there is often a wait and we must respond to that wait in faith, knowing that God is in control and that ultimately judgment will come. But there is a difference between the dispensation – or time period – when the psalmist wrote and the one in which we live.

Dispensations

- † The psalmist lived in the Old Testament era, and could thus look forward to an actually physical deliverance from his oppressors and to witness judgment upon God’s enemies. Today, we live in a different dispensation. Though Christ has come and been crowned king, he has chosen to delay judgment to mercifully allow time for more people to choose to believe in him. Thus, when we look forward to judgment of God’s enemies or for our own deliverance from them, we have to know that we might not see these things come to pass in our lifetimes.
- † Also, the Old Testament psalmist was hoping for God’s kingdom to come, anticipating Christ. Based on his understanding of God’s revelation at that time, he prayed for the coming overall judgment and deliverance, not just that for his specific situation. That we should still look forward to the time of Christ’s return, when he will bring judgment on his enemies, is testified by numerous New Testament examples.
- † However, simultaneously, we have some other new revelation: Christ calls on us to love our enemies during this waiting period, to hope and pray and work for their salvation.
- † Let’s look at Psalm 110, which illustrates the existence of our dispensation:
 - 1 The LORD says to my Lord:
"Sit at My right hand
Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."
 - 2 The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, {saying,}
"Rule in the midst of Your enemies."
 - 3 Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;
In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,
Your youth are to You {as} the dew.
 - 4 The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind,
"You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek."
 - 5 The Lord is at Your right hand;
He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.
 - 6 He will judge among the nations,
He will fill {them} with corpses,
He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.
 - 7 He will drink from the brook by the wayside;
Therefore He will lift up {His} head.
- † Yahweh is speaking to Adonai [ruler], here Christ. He sits next to God the Father after his ascension to Heaven. Notice the delay in the end of v.1: until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. This is the period of time between the ascension [cross] and the return. During this time, the enemies will rule and the righteous will suffer. The good news is that during this time, Christ is acting as the High Priest, so we have full access to God through him and we have the Holy Spirit whom he sent to us to empower us.

Love

- † Though God will judge, there is an overall theme of love in the Psalms. In Hebrew, the word for God’s kind of love is *hesed*. This is love that is sacrificial and unconditional. Man loves because someone loves him first or because he desires, but God loves even his enemies. For the Bible calls us God’s enemies before we believed in Christ – we were the wicked fool, scoffing, mocking, and sinning – and yet God had already made provision for us in the sacrifice of Christ and his love was not based on our merit but was unconditionally given.
- † Let’s look at a portion of Psalm 136:
 - 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good,
For His **lovingkindness is everlasting**...

[then the psalm repeats, alternating attributes of God, wonders of his creation, and evidence of his deliverance with the repeated line of “For His lovingkindness is everlasting.”]

- 23 Who **remembered us in our low estate**,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting,
24 And has **rescued us from our adversaries**,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;
25 Who **gives food** to all flesh,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
26 Give thanks to the God of heaven,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

† This exemplifies God's love: despite our low estate, he chose to provide for our needs and rescue us, and his love is everlasting. All we need do to avail ourselves of the fullness of this love is to trust in him and his provision.

Conclusion

We have looked at six features of the psalms, in the hope of better understanding and thus appreciating them. We have looked at the recurring characters, their methods of pursuing prosperity, the use of parallelism in the poetry of the psalms, and the concepts of judgment, love, and dispensations. I hope this has helped.