

Varieties of Psalms

The Psalms can be broadly divided into two categories: psalms of praise and psalms of laments. Often we find a blending of these two, as in Psalm 22 where the psalmist begins with strong laments but turns to praise before he is done. Yet across these broad categories we also find a number of kinds of psalms with different focal points. Again, there are areas of overlap, but here we wish to overview some of these kinds (and this won't be exhaustive). This helps us to see where stress is put upon the various circumstances and relationships between God and His people.

Wisdom. In Scripture, wisdom is often seen through the contrasting of godly wisdom with folly. Proverbs are well known for this, but even in the Psalms we find these contrasts. Psalm 1 is a perfect example of a wisdom psalm. In this psalm we find the blessed man who refuses the path of sinners and takes delight in God's Law. In contrast, the wicked have no foundation and they will perish. God's wisdom versus the folly of men is on full display.

Torah. While we often think of the Law when we think Torah, the Torah was more than a checklist of rules. It was their instructions for life, and it encompassed everything they did. The Torah psalms focus on this. Probably the best-known



example of a Torah psalm is Psalm 119, where the psalmist speaks of the Law, the precepts, ordinances, statutes, commandments, etc. Yet these are not seen as any kind of a burden, but as a delight. The Torah was

to be loved and cherished, obeyed and taught. "How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord" (vs. 1).

Kingship. Kingship, or royal, psalms exalt God's rule and God's king. God is the King, and the foundation of His throne is justice and righteousness (Psa. 89:14). Yet the Davidic King represented God to His people. Further, in the face of opposition from those who wanted to cast off the fetters of God's rule, God brings forth His King, His Son, to answer them. Psalm 2, which is also messianic, shows that God's King is not One to be trifled with, but will rule and is worthy of honor. "Worship the Lord with reverence and rejoice with trembling" (Psa. 2:11).

Temple. Many of the psalms demonstrate a temple context. These psalms would be used in corporate worship when they came to the temple. Praise psalms fit this pattern very well. For example, Psalm 47 shows this (vv. 6-7):

Sing praises to God, sing praises;
Sing praises to our King, sing praises.

For God is the King of all the earth;
Sing praises with a skillful psalm.

Other psalms show a longing for worship at the sanctuary. For example, Psalms 42-43, a lament, shows this longing: “For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival” (42:4). The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) would have been used as they went up to Zion to worship (some limit these to the Levites). The point is that the temple background throughout the psalms is important to understanding the content of many. While other psalms are more individual in nature (e.g., Psalm 51), the temple still plays a major role in the Psalms as a whole.

Imprecatory. Imprecatory psalms are the most difficult, as they entail some kind of request to curse the enemies. For example, Psalm 35 asks God to “Fight against those who fight against me” (vs. 1), “Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me” (vs. 4), and to “Let destruction come upon him unawares, and let the net which he hid catch himself; into that very destruction let him fall” (vs. 8). While understanding why men of God would pray such, we need to bear in mind the covenant context in which we were written. God Himself had promised to protect His people and bring judgment upon the enemies, so the psalmist is really asking God to remember the covenant relative to the enemy nations. There is much more to consider, but the lessons in these psalms are also extremely valuable.

Messianic. Messianic psalms point to Jesus. Jesus Himself said that the psalms

are fulfilled in Him (Luke 24:44-45). Some of them are more direct than others. For example, Psalm 110 is specifically about the Messiah who would be a priest after the order of Melchizedek and stretch out His scepter as the King. Psalm 22 portrays the events of the cross in vivid imagery. Psalm 2 shows the power of the King. The Psalms have very strong messianic connections, and we are blessed to read them today with a Christological focus.

Much more can be said, but this should help us as we think more deeply about the Psalms and see how they help us gain perspective on how we can come to God in worship and prayer. While we are no longer under the stipulations of the Law of Moses, the principles and topics covered still help us tremendously in our relationship with God today.

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