

Chapter Fourteen

The Voicing of Feelings: Psalms

The book of Psalms joins with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in expressing the cry of man's soul. Just as the soul has three major divisions--the emotions, mind and will--so these books express these divisions. The primal need of the human spirit is faith, because man was made to believe in God, but the cry of the human soul is for hope.

The book of Psalms particularly reflects the variety of human hopes. Every experience of man's heart is reflected here. No matter what mood you find yourself in, some psalm will reflect that mood, for this amazing book records every one of man's emotions and reactions. Some people seem to have discovered the secret of perpetual emotion; these people certainly ought to get well acquainted with the book of Psalms! For instance, if you are fearful read Psalm 56 or Psalm 91, or certainly Psalm 23, the famous Shepherd Psalm which everyone knows. If you are discouraged read Psalm 42 which is only one among many for the discouraged. If you happen to be feeling lonely, then turn to Psalm 71 or Psalm 62.

If you are oppressed by sinfulness there are two marvelous psalms for this: Psalm 51 written after David's double sin of adultery and murder, and Psalm 32, also David's great expression of confession and forgiveness. If you find yourself worried or anxious I would recommend Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. If you are angry, try Psalm 13 or Psalm 58. If you are resentful, Psalm 94 or Psalm 77. If you find yourself feeling happy and wanting words to express your happiness, read Psalm 92 or Psalm 66. If you feel forsaken, try Psalm 88. If you are grateful and would like to say so, read Psalm 40. If you are doubtful and you find faith is beginning to fail, read Psalm 119.

A few years ago I entered a house and stumbled upon the body of a man who had committed suicide. I found the body lying in a pool of blood. What a shock it was! I had known him fairly well for he had been coming to me for counseling help. That night I found it impossible to sleep because I was so disturbed and troubled. In that hour of desolation my wife and I turned to Psalms and read some of them together. It was the only book that could quiet our hearts in an hour of trouble and anguish. Psalms has always been the book where men and women of God have pillowed their heads in times of distress or heartache and sorrow. Whatever your feeling, turn to Psalms.

Many people think of Psalms as being entirely the work of King David, but in fact, though more than half of them were written by David, the sweet singer of Israel, there are several authors besides him and many of the psalms are anonymous. Most of them were written to be sung in public, which is why you will often find at the beginning of the psalm "to the chief choirmaster." In some Bibles the Hebrew titles are given which are normally translated either as psalms, prayers or praises. One psalm (90) was written by Moses and one by King Solomon:(127). There are also psalms by Asaph who was the chief choirmaster under King David, and a group of psalms is attributed to the Sons of Korah, who were a band of musicians charged with leading the singing of Israel. Thus the psalms were written over a long period of time, beginning with the days of Moses and including the return of Israel from exile in Babylon.

No one knows who collected the psalms, but the final collection of 150 psalms constitutes the longest book in the Bible and was divided from antiquity into five books, each ending with a doxology (praise to God). You will find the first one at the end of Psalm 41 which closes the first book and reads: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen."

Similar doxologies are found at the end of the other books: Book II from Psalm 42 to 72; Book III Psalm 73 to

89; Book IV Psalm 90 to 106; and Book V Psalm 107 to 150. Among the Jews the book of Psalms was closely associated with the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, and this may well represent a key to the structure of the book of Psalms.

As we have seen repeatedly, the five books of Moses were designed deliberately to give us a pattern of God's working in human history in the world of nations and with individuals. The five books of Psalms follow the same pattern, but reflect the emotional reactions of the heart to God's divine program. This explains the fact that has troubled many about Psalms. Certain psalms (called imprecatory psalms) speak with bitter, scorching words against enemies, calling down God's wrath upon them and wishing the enemies to be torn limb from limb and hung from the nearest tree. This disturbs many who feel the message of Psalms is much different from the New Testament with regard to loving our enemies and our treatment of them.

Other psalms give the impression that human existence ends with death and there is no afterlife, but we must remember that the psalms reflect the way people feel and not necessarily the reality of truth. Just as today we often find our reactions differing from what they "ought" to be, so it was in Bible times.

Furthermore, we can understand these troubling psalms better if we remember what the New Testament tells us about the Old Testament: "These things..." Paul says, "were written down for our instruction" (I Cor. 10:11). If we put ourselves in the place of the psalmist, we will see that the enemies he faces on the physical level correspond in remarkable ways to the enemies we face on the spiritual level. The New Testament tells us that "we are not contending against flesh and blood" (Eph. 6:12). We often feel that people are our enemies, but they are not. Our feelings would tell us to cry out against those who attack or oppress us, just as the writers of the psalms do; but in reality we know that our true enemies are the pressures of the evil one, the philosophies of the world and the attitudes of the flesh within. Remember Jesus said, "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.... For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (Matt. 15:11,19).

Thus when we read Psalms today, when we read of imprecations against enemies, we must think of our own temptations toward covetousness, jealousy or pride and ambition. If we do this, the severe language of Psalms makes great sense, for we are taught in the New Testament that we must deal severely with these inward attitudes. They have no right to be honored in a Christian's life.

This is what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away...If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29,30). Jesus does not mean to do this literally. He simply means we are to deal with temptation ruthlessly. So the ruthless psalms picture the way we must deal with the real enemies of the heart. And the doubting psalms are not expressions of truth, but of the way life looks to someone who is thinking only within the boundaries of birth and death.

Book I, Man's Awareness of His Need

If we follow the ancient Jewish practice of linking the five books of Psalms with the five books of the Pentateuch, we will find a key to understanding the special grouping of psalms. As Genesis in the Pentateuch describes man's awareness of his need for God and his inadequacy in himself, so the first book of Psalms--Psalms 1 to 42--in general expresses that same sense of need. It begins in Psalm 1 with a picture of the perfect man, just as Genesis begins with man in the Garden of Eden. Psalm 2 presents man in his rebellion: "Why are the nations in an uproar, and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed: Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!" (vv. 1-3, NASB).

Psalms 3 through 7 are various expressions of man's sense of rejection and of attack from the world and enemies without. But Psalm 8 is a marvelous expression of man's awareness of an eternal destiny and a deep and intimate relationship which he once enjoyed with God and which he hopes will be restored. Even in his brokenness, man is learning to worship, and cries out: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!"

Psalm 8 is paralleled in Psalm 19 which also reflects upon the glory of God in nature and compares it with the

glory revealed through revelation. In these two psalms are expressed God's double method of communicating with His human family through the things He has made and the things He has said.

The fourteenth Psalm is a recognition of the folly of being ungodly and a reassurance to those who seek to walk with God: though the ungodly seem to flourish, a certain judgment will overtake them unless they repent. Psalm 16, along with Psalms 2, 22 and 40, are messianic psalms, clearly predicting the sufferings of Christ and the glory which should follow. Portions of these psalms are quoted in the New Testament and applied to the life of Jesus. Psalm 16 is particularly the psalm of resurrection referred to as such by Peter on the Day of Pentecost where he quotes verse 10: "For Thou cost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the pit" (see also Acts 2:27). Psalm 22 describes in a most remarkable way details of the crucifixion, beginning with the very words of Jesus from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." Graphic details are given, even including the prophecy of the soldiers casting lots over Christ's seamless robe, and the piercing of Jesus' hands and feet.

The universal favorite of all the psalms is found in this section, Psalm 23. Here is the great Shepherd seeking the lost sheep and leading him into green pastures and beside still waters. Psalm 27 is a song of confidence in God's sovereign ability to strengthen the life and steady the heart in the face of conflict and distress. Psalms 28 through 31 describe various experiences of David and his recognition of his need for God's help in these circumstances. Psalm 32 is the noteworthy psalm of repentance and forgiveness. This psalm meant so much to Saint Augustine that he had it carved on wood and hung at the foot of his bed that he might see it every morning when he awoke. The apostle Paul quotes from it in Romans 4 as an example of what God will do with human sin when it is confessed before Him.

The closing psalms of Book I express the human heart's deep-seated longing in its separation from God and its desire to find Him in the midst of need. Psalm 40 is a beautiful example of this: "I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Ps. 40:1-3 NASB).

Psalm 41, which closes Book I, looks back to Psalm 1 and describes the blessed man--this time not one who is perfect in his own integrity, but one whom the Lord protects and sustains. This psalm ends the book with the doxology: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen" (v. 13).

Book II, Man's Longing for Deliverance

The second book of psalms covers Psalms 42 through 72, and corresponds in theme to the book of Exodus. As Exodus tells us the story of Israel in captivity in Egypt-- describing their sorrow, their bondage and the slavery of sin, yet learning much of the grace of God in His power to deliver them and bring them out of captivity--so the second book of psalms traces the same theme in a wider human experience. The slavery of sin and the longing for deliverance is beautifully expressed in the opening words of Psalm 42: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food-day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?' " (vv. 1-3 NASB).

But immediately the theme focuses upon the greatness of God and His power. Book II finds its theme in Psalm 45 which describes God as King, ruling in sovereignty over man and all his experiences. The book also closes with a psalm of the King, Psalm 72, in which God is pictured in mighty conquering power, setting man free from the bondage which has enslaved him.

Psalm 46 becomes a very appropriate expression of confidence in God as a refuge: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Psalm 50 looks at God as the Judge of the earth, describing Him as: "The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes, he does not keep silence, before him is devouring fire, round about him a mighty tempest" (vv. 1-3).

The theme of redemption is continued in Psalm 51 which is one of the great biblical expressions of confession and cleansing from sin. This was written after David's twin sins of murder and adultery, and records first his godly sorrow then his forthright confession and desire to turn from his evil, calling for the forgiveness of God and God's restoration to service so that he might tell others of the restoring grace of a loving God.

Psalm 59 includes a good example of the imprecations of God's people when they are suffering persecution and oppression: "My God in His loving-kindness will meet me; God will let me look triumphantly upon my foes. Do not I slay them, lest my people forget; scatter them by Thy I power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield. On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them, that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob, to the ends of the earth" (w. 10-13 NASB).

Many of us today feel exactly like this when we are being persecuted or oppressed, but we must always remember that the New Testament reveals that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. Our oppressors are victims themselves and need our prayers and help that they may be delivered from that which causes them to act with cruelty and bitterness.

Psalms 60 through 64 describe similar experiences of . repression. Psalm 65 breaks out into a note of praise for God's delivering grace. This theme is continued through Psalms 66-68. But like Israel at the Red Sea, having been delivered from the bondage of Egypt and yet sinking again into despair at the waters before them, so Psalm 69 cries out: "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold, I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God" (vv. 1-3). This beautiful psalm moves on to describe sufferings which could only have been fulfilled in the sufferings of Jesus, and several of the verses are quoted in the New Testament in this way.

But again deliverance comes from the mighty hand of God and, as we have already seen, the book closes with the great psalm of the King and the doxology: "Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders. And blessed be His glorious name forever; and may the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen, and Amen" (Ps. 72:18,19, NASB).

Book III, Man's Heart Before God

Psalms 73 through 89 constitute the third book of Psalms. This corresponds in theme to the book of Leviticus which is the book of Tabernacle worship, the discovery of what God is like when man comes before Him and what man is like in the presence of God. Thus the theme of Book III reveals the inner workings of man's heart and his discovery of what God is like.

Psalm 73 opens the book by facing one of the most common problems of faith in an unbelieving world--the problem of why the ungodly prosper and seem to enjoy so much of God's blessing while the righteous suffer. The psalmist describes how terribly unfair this seemed to him until he went into the sanctuary and there reamed what the end of the unrighteous will be. His conclusion is: "For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish; Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works" (73:27,28 NASB). This psalm establishes the theme of Book III. It describes the sanctuary of God in which truth is seen in all its reality.

This theme is continued through Psalm 78. These psalms lay heavy emphasis upon the duty of believers to look back upon God's dealings in the past and remember what they learned through their previous times of deliverance in order to help them in the present. Psalm 77 is a particularly vivid description of one who loses his sense of faith altogether and is only restored by thoughtful consideration of the unchangeable record of God's dealings in the past.

Psalms 80 and 81 describe the sense of wrongdoing which believers experience that they may learn to value afresh the forgiveness and restoration of God. Psalm 80 links with Psalm 23 as a further ministry of the great Shepherd of Israel to His believing flock

A new theme is introduced in Psalms 81 through 84 depicting God's desire to be with His people, to see them delivered from their iniquities and to abundantly heap upon them blessings He desires to give. The beautiful eighty-fourth psalm which has been put to music and is frequently sung, is an expression of the New Testament emphasis upon the indwelling of God in the human heart. It is clear that Old Testament believers experienced this indwelling as fully as New Testament believers do, but they came to the knowledge of it by a more roundabout and shadowy method, for they were being taught by symbols and ceremonies rather than by direct statement of truth.

Again Psalms 85 through 88 record the psalmist's cry for God's deliverance; and the closing psalm of Book III, 89, is a magnificent description of God's covenant promise upon which the believer may safely rest. This psalm is a poetic counterpart to the covenant God made with David, described in 2 Samuel 7. The psalm goes on to speak prophetically of the culmination of the Davidic line in Jesus and the fullness of deliverance which He will bring. Beyond David is seen David's greater Son, and He is described in these words: "My faithfulness and My loving-kindness will be with him, and in My name his horn will be exalted. I shall also set his hand on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers. He will cry to Me, 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.' I also shall make him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. My loving-kindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him" (w. 24-28, NASB).

On this triumphant theme Book III closes with the briefest benediction: "Blessed be the Lord for ever! Amen and Amen."

Book IV, Man's Wilderness Experience

The book of Numbers is the record of the wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years, so the fourth book of Psalms, covering Psalms 90 through 106, reflects the up and down wilderness experience of a believer. This alliterating theme is clearly seen in Psalms 90 and 91. Psalm 90 was written by Moses and was undoubtedly sung by Israel during the days of their wilderness wanderings. It is a recognition of the frailty of men and the justice and greatness of God. The psalmist describes life thus: "For all our days have declined in Thy fury; we have finished our years like a sigh. As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away" (v. 9, 10 NASB).

Yet the next psalm, 91, is the very opposite. It describes the delight of one who has turned to the Lord and dwells in the secret shelter of the Most High. When the believer walks closely with his God, even in the wilderness, his heart is kept strong and confident, but when he wanders away, trusting in his own resources, he feels estranged from God and suffers under a sense of guilt and condemnation. The alternating experience is seen again in Psalm 95 which opens with the familiar words: "O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms" (v. 1 NASB).

Yet in verse 8 the voice of God is heard: "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness; when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation, and said they are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways" (NASB).

Psalms 96 through 101 are all psalms of rejoicing, but in Psalm 102 the psalmist bewails his aimless existence and says: "My days are like a lengthened shadow; and I wither away like grass" (v. 11, NASB). The closing verses of this psalm are quoted in Hebrews 1 as referring to Jesus: "Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands; they will perish, but Thou remainest; and they all will become old as a garment, and as a mantle Thou wilt roll them up; as a garment they will also be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end" (Heb. 1:10-12 NASB).

Thus even in the wilderness experiences of life there is a continual recognition of the presence of One who will not forsake; One who never relaxes His vigilance even though those whom He guards are unaware of His presence. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:4 says that the Israelites "were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ" (NASB).

Psalms 103 through 106 are historic psalms, reviewing Israel's past experiences of deliverance by the hand of the Lord in order that the faith of God's people might be awakened in the present and they will be encouraged to endure their present trials. Book IV, therefore, appropriately closes with the cry: "Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, to give thanks to Thy holy name and glory in Thy praise" (106:47 NASB).

Book V, Man's Deliverance

The fifth and longest book of Psalms corresponds to the book of Deuteronomy in theme. It records the fullness of deliverance brought about by the resources of God instead of by reliance upon dedicated human resources. Psalm 107 introduces this theme with a remarkable sequence of deliverances, all achieved by men in various circumstances who cry to the Lord in their troubles and find that He is able to deliver them. The experiences cited correspond remarkably with various attitudes and depressions which believers experience today. There are those who seem to wander in desert places. There are those who sit as prisoners held in bonds of iron and affliction. There are those who are sick because of their sinful ways and who spend their days in jaded and restless boredom. There are those who face great danger and pressure and yet in it all they find God adequate to deliver when they abandon trust in their own resources.

Psalm 109 is regarded as the most severe of the imprecatory psalms, but certain indications suggest that the imprecations are properly viewed as quotations from the psalmist's enemies and represent the things they are saying about him. Viewed in that sense the psalm is another great expression of the power of God to sustain under bitter attack. Psalms 110 and 118 are clearly messianic psalms, looking beyond David's experience to a more complete fulfillment in Jesus and His universal reign.

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the book of Psalms and follows the Hebrew alphabet with 22 sections, each of which begins with a different alphabet letter. The theme of Psalm 119 is the Word of God and its remarkable power to examine the heart and deal with the thoughts and intents of man's inner life, correct and sustain the spirit, and in every way accomplish the work and will of God.

Psalms 120 through 134 are called Songs of Ascent, and were sung by worshipers as they marched up to Jerusalem from various parts of the land to offer their sacrifices in the Temple. They contain beautiful expressions of thanksgiving and praise to God as the deliverer and protector of His people.

Psalm 137 seems to be the one psalm which comes out of the exile of Israel in Babylon. It is probably the last of the psalms written and was added to the collection probably by Ezra the priest. Psalm 139 corresponds in theme to Psalm 8, and recognizes the omniscience and omnipresence of God in relationship to a single individual, and God's knowledge of the human makeup. A short section of the psalms, from 140 through 143, reflect various prayers for God's help; but beginning with Psalm 144 to Psalm 150 there is almost unbroken praise and thanksgiving, expressed in magnificent language. These psalms sound one triumphant note all through, and the closing psalm is made up of hallelujah: "Praise the Lord."

These triumphant psalms are the expression of someone so excited about God that all he can do is shout "Hallelujah!" That will always be the experience of one who learns to understand the pattern of God's working in his life.

The psalms are designed to teach us to do one primary thing--to worship. Though they reflect every human emotion, they do so in a distinct and important way: They are emotions seen in relationship to God. Every psalm is written as in the very presence of God. This book therefore teaches us how to be honest before God. If you have a problem in your life, tell God about it. Don't hide it. Don't cover it up. Especially, do not become pious and sanctimonious and try to act as though there is no trouble. If you feel angry with God, it is best to say so. If you are upset about something, tell Him your sense of disturbance but remind Him also that you know how foolish it is to be upset with Him. If you are resentful, bring that out. If you are happy and joyful, express that. This is what worship is--a heart pouring out honest reactions to a God who can both correct and restore. If we learn to be honest before God even about troubles and problems, wrong moods and resentful attitudes, we shall quickly find His grace answering our needs.

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