CHAPTER 11

The Psalms: Israel's Prayers and Ours

The book of Psalms, a collection of inspired Hebrew prayers and hymns, is probably for most Christians the best-known and most-loved portion of the Old Testament. The fact that the book of Psalms is often appended to copies of the New Testament and that psalms are used so often in worship and meditation has given this particular book a certain prominence for modern readers.

But frequently the psalms, as beloved as they are, present special difficulties for understanding, since the poetic features of rhyme and repetitive meter (factors that indeed allow poetry to be far more memorable than most prose) take very different forms in Hebrew poetry, and, more importantly, are virtually always lost in English translation. Further difficulty with interpreting the psalms arises primarily from their nature — what they are. Because the Bible is God's word, many Christians automatically assume that all it contains are words *from* God *to* people. Thus they fail to recognize that the Bible also contains words spoken *to* God or *about* God — which is

what the psalms do — and that these words, too, are God's Word. That is, because psalms are basically prayers and hymns, by their very nature they are addressed to God or express truth about God in song.

This reality presents us with a unique problem of hermeneutics in Scripture. *How* do these words spoken *to* God function as a word *from* God to us? Since they are not propositions or imperatives or stories that get us in touch with God's story, they do not function primarily for the teaching of doctrine or moral behavior. Yet they are profitable when used for the purposes intended by God, who inspired them, by helping us to express ourselves to God and to consider God's ways. The psalms, therefore, are of great benefit to the believer who looks to the Bible for help in expressing joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and regrets, or simply to worship.

But the psalms are frequently applied poorly, if not in an altogether wrong way, precisely because they are often so poorly understood. Not all of them are as easy to follow logically, or to apply to the twenty-first century, as perhaps the best known of them all, Psalm 23. In its symbolism God is portrayed as a shepherd, and the psalmist (and thus ourselves) as his sheep. God's willingness to care for us by pasturing us in the appropriate places (i.e., meeting our every need, generously protecting us and benefiting us) is evident to those who are familiar with the psalm. And, of course, the psalmist knew well what very few modern readers know, that sheep are probably among the dumbest animals ever to walk on our planet. Despite the verb that comes to us in English from this occupation, one does not easily "herd" sheep. Our guess is that this frequent analogy in Scripture was not intended to

flatter us! Rather, it serves as a constant reminder as to how greatly we need the great Shepherd's tender, loving care.

But other psalms do not yield their meaning so easily at first glance. For example, how is one to use a psalm that seems to be negative throughout (e.g., Ps 88) and seems to express the misery of the speaker? Is this something that should be used in a church service? Or is it for private use only? And what of a psalm that tells about the history of Israel and God's blessings on it? Can a modern Christian, for example, make good use of this sort of psalm? Or is it reserved only for Jews? Or how about psalms that predict the work of the Messiah? Or what of psalms that laud the benefits of wisdom? What about the several psalms that discuss the glory of Israel's human kings? Since very few people in the world now live under royalty, it would seem especially difficult to make sense of this latter sort of psalm. And finally, what does one do with the desire that Babylonian infants should be dashed against the rocks (137:8 – 9)?

It would require a lengthy book to discuss all the types of psalms and all their possible uses. In this chapter we provide some guidelines by which you can be in a better position to appreciate and use the psalms both in your personal life and in the life of your local church. You may also want to look at *How to 2*, pages 130 – 43, to get a sense of how they work as a collection — in five "books."

SOME PRELIMINARY EXEGETICAL

OBSERVATIONS

As a distinct kind of literature, psalms require special care in reading and interpreting — in this case, the reader will need to understand their *nature* and their various *types*, as well as their *forms* and *functions*.

The Psalms as Poetry

The most important item to remember in reading or interpreting psalms is that they are poems — musical poems. We have already briefly discussed the nature of Hebrew poetry in the preceding chapter (pp. 204 – 06; if you have not read these pages, you will want to do so now), but there are three additional points that need to be made in connection with the Psalter.

1. *Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed to the mind through the heart* (i.e., much of the language is intentionally emotive). Because of this feature common to biblical poetry, a reader must be careful not to "overexegete" psalms by finding special meanings in specific words or phrases where the poet will have intended none. For example, you will recall that the nature of Hebrew poetry always involves some form of parallelism and that one common form is that called synonymous parallelism (where the second line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line; see p. 205). In this type of parallelism, the two lines together express the poet's meaning, and the second line is not trying to say something new or different. Consider, for example, the opening of Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.

Here, in two sets of synonymous parallelism, the inspired poet is glorifying God as Creator. Notice how the NIV translators have tried to help you see the parallels by capitalizing only the first line in each couplet and using a semicolon between the two lines.

The poet's point in plain prose is, "God is revealed in his creation, especially in the heavenly bodies." But our plain-prose sentence is totally colorless next to the magnificent poetry of the psalm, which both says it better and in a more memorable way. Note that the four lines are not trying to say four different things, although the second set adds the new idea that during both the day and the night the heavens reveal their maker. In the first set the psalmist is not trying to say that the "heavens" do one thing and the "skies" another; together the two lines speak of one glorious reality, that creation itself demonstrates God's glory and wonders.

2. *The psalms themselves are musical poems.* A musical poem cannot be read in the same way as an epistle or a narrative or a section of law. It is intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings that straight propositional expression seldom does, and thus to stimulate a response on the part of the individual that goes beyond a mere cognitive understanding of certain facts — this, after all, is the very reason musical poems are so well-loved, and so easily remembered. None of us would ever say in normal conversation, "glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of

our God." But for those of us who know John Newton's hymn well, we can both immediately pick up the next line, "He whose word cannot be broken, formed thee for his own abode," and put ourselves into the poetry. The church is God's dominion, not ours, and we can rest in that greater reality. So with psalms; while they contain and reflect doctrine, they are not intended to be repositories for doctrinal exposition. Thus it is dangerous to read a psalm as though it taught a system of doctrine, in the same way that it is dangerous to do this with narrative.

For example, who of us in singing Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (based on Psalm 46:1) would assume that God is in fact some kind of a fortification or impenetrable building or wall? We understand that "mighty fortress" is a figurative way of thinking about God. In the same way, when the psalmist says, "And in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5 NASB), the writer is hardly trying to establish the doctrine that conception is sinful, or that all conceptions are sinful, or that his mother was a sinner by getting pregnant, or that original sin applies to unborn children, or any such notion. The psalmist has employed hyperbole — purposeful exaggeration — in order to express strongly and vividly that he is a sinner, with a long history of such. Thus the present NIV has put it well: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." This is poetry, not theology, where the psalmist expressed poetically that his sinful ways did not begin recently! To make it say something more than that is simply to abuse poetry, not to mention Scripture itself. Thus, when you read a psalm, be careful that you do not try to derive from it concepts that were never intended by the musical poet who was inspired to write it. Let it do what it was originally intended to do, such as prompting you to stop momentarily,

and recognize the incredible greatness and goodness of God.

3. *The vocabulary of poetry is purposefully metaphorical*. Thus one must take care to look for the intent of the metaphor. In the book of Psalms, mountains leap like rams (114:4; singing about God's presence at Mount Sinai, narrated in Exod 19:16 – 25!); enemies spew out swords from their lips (59:7; who has not felt the sharp pain of slander or lies?); and God is variously seen as a shepherd, fortress, shield, rock, *etc*. It is extremely important that you learn to "listen" to the metaphors and understand what they signify, and from time to time, pause to reflect on the truths they convey, including God's vast love for us all.

It is also important that one not press metaphors or take them literally. If someone were to take Psalm 23 literally, for example, they might make the rather excessive mistake of assuming that God wants us to be and act like sheep, or else wants us to live a rural, pastoral life. In so doing the psalm would become a treatise against city life. To read any of the psalms well, you need to appreciate symbolic language (metaphor and simile) for what it is intended to evoke and then to "translate" it into the reality it is pointing to.

The Psalms as Literature

As musical poems, psalms are also a form of literature, with certain distinct literary features. Being aware of these should aid your reading and enjoyment.

1. *Psalms are of several different types*. This is so important to your understanding that we will elaborate on the basic types later in the chapter. The Israelites themselves, of course, were fully acquainted with all these types. They knew the difference between a psalm of lament (whereby an individual or a group

could express grief before the Lord and appeal for help) and a psalm of thanksgiving (whereby individuals or groups expressed joy in the mercy God had already shown them). But since psalms are not an ordinary part of our culture, you may need regularly to ask yourself before you start reading any given psalm: What *type* of psalm am I reading?

2. *Each psalm is also characterized by its formal structure*. One item that distinguishes the various types of psalms from each other is that each type has its own structural characteristics. With some understanding of the formal structure of a psalm, you will be able to recognize such features as the transitions from topic to topic or the way the psalmist apportions the attention paid to given issues, and thus have an appreciation for the message the psalm conveys. This will be especially apparent in our exegetical sampling presented later on.

3. *Each type of psalm was intended to have a given function in the life of Israel*. This matter will also receive special attention below. For now one must remember that each psalm has an intended purpose. The royal psalms, for example, were composed to be sung at the celebration of Israel's kingship as God endowed it, and not, for example, at weddings(!).

4. *There are also various patterns within the psalms.* The psalmists frequently took delight in certain arrangements or repetitions of words and sounds, as well as stylistic plays on words. Moreover, some psalms are acrostics; that is, the initial letters of each line or verse work through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is an example of an acrostic psalm, where each letter of the alphabet begins a set of eight verses (note how these are set off in the NIV). Its pattern

of enumeration and repetition effectively guides the reader through a long list of the believers' benefits from and responsibilities toward the law of God.

5. *Each psalm has its own integrity as a literary unit.* Psalms are to be treated as wholes, not atomized into single verses or, as is often the case with proverbs, thought of as so many pearls on a string, each to be enjoyed for its own sake apart from its relationship to the whole. As you read a given psalm, learn to follow its flow and balance. Each psalm has a pattern of development by which its ideas are presented, developed, and brought to some kind of conclusion.

This last matter needs special emphasis. Because of the literary unity of any given psalm, one must be especially careful to keep individual verses in their context in the psalm, not seeing them only in their own light and not treating them as though they needed no context in which to be interpreted. For example, consider Psalm 51:16: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings." Taken out of context, this may seem to suggest that the sacrificial system has no real importance under the former covenant. But how, then, does this fit with what is said at the end: "Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar" (v. 19)?

The answer is, of course, that in the full context of the psalm, David is acknowledging that sacrifices without genuine contrition and repentance mean simply to go through the motions. What God delights in is the contrite heart that accompanies the sacrifices. So to read the earlier line (v. 16) on its own is to miss its point *in this psalm.* Our point is that there is a framework of meaning that helps us to define the earlier

words (v. 16), and thus to understand them according to their real intent rather than according to some intent we may assign them because we do not know the context. Decontextualizing any part of a psalm is to betray the psalmist, and will often lead to wrong conclusions. Whenever one takes even a part of a piece of literature and uses it wrongly, and especially so with poetry(!), that literature will be unable to do what it was intended to do, and so God's purposes in inspiring it are thwarted.

THE USE OF THE PSALMS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

The psalms were functional songs composed for use in worship by the ancient Israelites. By *functional* we mean that they served the crucial function of making connection between the worshiper and God. Although some of them appear to have been intended for use by individual worshipers (e.g., Ps 63), many of them were intended for corporate use (e.g., Pss 74; 147 – 150). Indeed, psalms were commonly used as worship aids by Israelites when they brought sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem. Based on some of the titles (e.g., Pss 80 and 81), it seems likely that professional singers sometimes sang psalms during the time people were worshiping. However, it is obvious that the knowledge of the psalms spread widely beyond the temple, and that people began to sing them in all sorts of situations where the wordings expressed their own attitudes and circumstances. The psalms were eventually collected into groupings called "books." There are five such books (Book 1: Pss 1 – 41; Book 2: Pss 42 – 72; Book 3: Pss 73 – 89; Book 4: Pss 90 – 106; Book 5: Pss 107 – 150). For the significance of

this grouping, see *How to 2*, pages 130 – 43.

Understandably, it is not possible to date most of the psalms with certainty. The ambiguity, however, is not in this case a significant exegetical problem. The psalms are remarkably applicable to *all* "times and climes." As with great hymns, their uses in ancient Israel are instructive to us but do not confine us to the worship and prayer of a past age. As they speak to the heart of a believer or group of believers gathered together in worship, the pan-cultural, pan-geographic value of the psalms is demonstrated.

Because certain groups of psalms have special characteristics, it is likely that they were collected originally into smaller groupings (e.g., psalms of David; "Hallelujah" psalms [146 – 150]), which have now been included together within the five major books. But these categories are less significant in terms of the present organization of the book of Psalms, because so many different types are scattered throughout the present order of the Psalter.

According to the titles, which are not part of the original psalms and therefore are not considered inspired, David wrote almost half the psalms, seventy-three in all. Moses wrote one (Ps 90), Solomon wrote two (Pss 72 and 127), and the "sons" of Asaph and of Korah, etc., also wrote several ("sons of" being a Hebraism for an ongoing "school" of musicians).

After the Israelites returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, the book of Psalms was apparently made a formal collection, almost a "temple hymnal," with the untitled Psalms 1 and 2 being placed at the beginning as an introduction to the whole and Psalm 150 at the end as a conclusion. From the New Testament we see that Jews in general, and Jesus and his

disciples in particular, knew the psalms well. The psalms continued to be part of their worship. Paul encourages the early Christians to encourage one another with "psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). At least the first two of these terms can refer to the book of Psalms, although in giving this advice Paul may also have had in mind other types of early Christian music.

THE TYPES OF PSALMS

It is possible to group psalms into seven different categories. Though these categories may overlap somewhat or have subcategories, they serve well to classify the psalms and thus to guide the reader toward good use of them.

Laments

Laments constitute the largest group of psalms in the Psalter, which in itself probably says something about our common humanity. There are more than sixty, including individual and corporate laments. *Individual* laments (e.g., 3; 22; 31; 39; 42; 57; 71; 88; 120; 139; 142), which either express or presuppose deep trust in Yahweh, help a person to express struggles, suffering, or disappointment to the Lord. *Corporate* laments (e.g., 12; 44; 80; 94; 137) do the same for a group of people rather than for an individual. Are you discouraged? Is your church going through a difficult period? Are you part of a family or group, small or large, that wonders why things are not going as well as you had expected? If so, the use of laments is potentially a valuable adjunct to your own expression of

concern to the Lord. Indeed, one of the more moving experiences in the life of one of the authors was to hear Psalm 88 read aloud in a chapel service within hours of the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Times were often hard for the ancient Israelites. The laments in the book of Psalms express with a deep, honest fervor the distress that people felt.

Thanksgiving Psalms

These psalms were used, as the name suggests, in circumstances very opposite from those of the laments. Such psalms expressed joy to the Lord because something had gone well, because circumstances were good, or because people had reason to render thanks to God for his faithfulness, protection, and benefits. The thanksgiving psalms help a person or a group express thoughts and feelings of gratitude. In all, there are six community (group) psalms of thanksgiving (65; 67; 75; 107; 124; 136) and ten individual psalms of thanksgiving (18; 30; 32; 34; 40; 66; 92; 116; 118; 138) in the Psalter.

Hymns of Praise

These psalms — without particular reference to personal miseries or joys, whether previous or recent — center on the praise of God for who God is, for God's greatness and beneficence toward the whole earth as well as God's own people. The Eternal One may be praised as Creator of the universe, as in Psalms 8; 19; 104; and 148; or may be praised as the protector and benefactor of Israel, as in Psalms 66; 100; 111; 114; and 149; or may be praised as the Lord of history, as in Psalms 33; 103; 113; 117; and 145 – 147. God deserves praise. These psalms are especially adapted for individual or group praise in worship. They help us "sing praises to our God,"

something that is truly "pleasant and fitting" (Ps 147:1).

Salvation-History Psalms

These few psalms (78; 105; 106; 135; 136) have as their focus a review of the history of God's saving works among the people of Israel, especially his deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt and his creation of them as a people. Israel, from whom eventually came Jesus the Christ and through whom the message of God was mediated, is, of course, a special nation in human history, and its story is celebrated in these salvation-history psalms. You will notice that each has a different purpose (celebration, thanksgiving, warning, etc.).

Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation

Several kinds of psalms are included in this category. A first group is the covenant renewal liturgies, such as Psalms 50 and 81, which are designed to lead God's people to a renewal of the covenant first given to them on Mount Sinai. These psalms can serve effectively as worship guidelines for a service of renewal. Psalms 89 and 132 are often categorized as Davidic covenant psalms, which praise the importance of God's choice of the lineage of David. Inasmuch as this lineage eventually leads into the birth of our Lord, these psalms provide background for his messianic ministry.

There are nine psalms in the Psalter that deal especially with the kingship. These we call royal psalms (2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 101; 110; 144). One of them (18) is a royal thanksgiving psalm and one of them (144) a royal lament. The kingship in ancient Israel was an important institution because through it God provided stability and protection. Though most of Israel's kings were unfaithful, God nevertheless could use any of them

for good purposes. The Eternal One works through intermediaries in society, and the praise of the function of these intermediaries is what we find in the royal psalms.

Related to the royal psalms are the so-called "enthronement psalms" (24; 29; 47; 93; 95 – 99). It is likely that these psalms celebrated the enthronement of the king in ancient Israel, a ceremony that may have been repeated yearly. Some scholars have argued that they represent also the enthronement of the Lord himself and were used as liturgies for some sort of ceremony that celebrated this, although the evidence for this is scant.

Finally, there is a category called the Songs of Zion, or Songs of the City of Jerusalem (46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 122). According to the predictions of God through Moses to the Israelites while they were yet in the wilderness (e.g., Deut 12), Jerusalem became the central city of Israel, the place where the temple was built as the visible expression of God's presence with his people and the place from which the kingship of David exercised authority. Jerusalem as the "holy city" receives special attention and celebration in these songs. Inasmuch as the book of Revelation makes use of the symbol of a new Jerusalem (the new heaven that descends to earth), these psalms remain useful in Christian worship.

Wisdom Psalms

Eight psalms (36; 37; 49; 73; 112; 127; 128; 133) can be placed in this category. We may note also that Proverbs 8 is itself a psalm, praising, as these others do, the merits of wisdom and the wise life. These psalms may be read profitably along with the book of Proverbs. (See the section on Proverbs in ch. 12.)

Songs of Trust

These ten psalms (11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 63; 91; 121; 125; 131) center their attention on the fact that God can be trusted and that, even in times of despair, God's goodness and care for his people ought to be expressed. God delights in knowing that those who believe in him trust him for their lives and for what he will choose to give them. These psalms help us express our trust in God, whatever our circumstances.

For those who wish to explore further the different categories of the psalms and to understand the characteristics that determine how psalms are categorized, we recommend Bernhard Anderson with Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today,* 3rd ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000); or Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988). These books not only contain additional details of how the psalms functioned in ancient Israel but also make further suggestions for the way they might function in the lives of believers today.

AN EXEGETICAL SAMPLING

In order for us to illustrate how knowing a psalm's form and structure helps us appreciate its message, we have chosen two psalms for close examination. One is a personal lament; the other is a thanksgiving psalm.

Psalm 3: A Lament

By carefully comparing all the lament psalms, scholars have been able to isolate six elements that appear in one way or another in virtually all of them. These elements, in their typical order, are as follows:

1. *Address.* The psalmist identifies the one to whom the psalm is prayed. This is, of course, the Lord.
2. *Complaint.* The psalmist pours out a complaint honestly and forcefully, identifying what the trouble is and why God's help is being sought.
3. *Trust.* The psalmist immediately expresses trust in God, which serves as the presuppositional basis for his complaint. (Why pour out a complaint to God if you don't trust him?) Moreover, you must trust God to answer your complaint in keeping with the bigger picture, God's own greater purposes predicated on God's grace, not necessarily the answer that you yourself would come up with.
4. *Deliverance.* The psalmist cries out to God for deliverance from the situation described in the complaint.
5. *Assurance.* The psalmist expresses the assurance that God will deliver. This assurance is somewhat parallel to the expression of trust.
6. *Praise.* The psalmist offers praise, thanking and honoring God for the blessings of the past, present, and/or future.

Psalm 3

1 LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
2 Many are saying of me,
"God will not deliver him."
3 But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
4 I call out to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
5 I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
6 I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.
7 Arise, LORD!
Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;

break the teeth of the wicked.

8 From the LORD comes deliverance.

May your blessing be on your people.

In this psalm, the six elements of a lament are to be identified as follows:

1. *Address.* This is the cry "LORD" (Hebrew *yhwh*, from which we render "Yahweh") of verse 1. Note that the address need not be lengthy or fancy. Simple prayers will always do! Note also that the address is repeated in parallel form in verse 7. The cry is directed not just to anyone or any group, but to the only true God, the only one who has both the power and love to respond perfectly to the need of the petitioner.
2. *Complaint.* This comprises the remainder of verse 1 and all of verse 2. David describes the foes (who in these psalms can function as personified symbols of virtually any misery or problem) and how bleak his situation seems. *Any* difficulty can be expressed this way.
3. *Trust.* Here verses 3 – 6 are all part of the expression of trust in the Lord. Who God is, how God answers prayer, how God's people are kept secure even when their situation is apparently hopeless — all this represents evidence that God is trustworthy.
4. *Deliverance.* In verse 7a ("Arise, LORD! Deliver me, my God!") David expresses his (and *our*) plea for help. Notice how the direct request for aid has been held until

this point in the psalm, coming *after* the expression of trust. This order is not required but is normal. A balance between asking and praising seems to characterize the laments, and this should be instructive to us relative to our own prayers.

5. *Assurance.* The remainder of verse 7 ("Strike all my . . .") constitutes the statement of assurance. You may ask: What sort of assurance is communicated by this pugilistic picture of God? In fact, the language is, again, metaphorical rather than literal. "You have already knocked out all my real problems" would be a suitable paraphrase, since the "enemies" and the "wicked" stand for the problems and distresses David felt then and we feel now. By this vivid picture, the defeat of that which oppresses us is envisioned. But remember that this part of the psalm is not promising that God's people will be trouble free. It expresses the assurance that in God's own time our really significant problems will be taken care of according to the divine plan for us.
6. *Praise.* Verse 8 lauds God for his faithfulness. Yahweh (the LORD) is declared to be *the* deliverer, and in the request for divine blessing, he is implicitly declared to be *the* one who blesses.

Much can be learned from a lament such as Psalm 3. The importance of balanced prayer is at the top of the list. Requests should be balanced by appreciation; complaints by expressions of confidence. Note also how freely and strongly David is inspired to word the complaint and the appeal. This example of honesty leads us to be more willing to express ourselves to God openly without covering over our problems.

The psalm, however, is not designed specifically to instruct but to be used as a guide. We can read and reflect on this very psalm when we are at wit's end, discouraged, seemingly surrounded by problems, feeling defeated. Such a psalm will help us to express our thoughts and feelings and to rely on God's faithfulness, just as it did for the ancient Israelites. God has placed it in the Bible so that it may help us commune with him and cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us (1 Pet 5:7).

The group lament psalms, sometimes called "community laments," follow the same six-step pattern. A family or church or other group facing difficult circumstances can use these psalms in a way analogous to the way the individual uses a psalm like Psalm 3.

Psalm 138: A Thanksgiving Psalm

Thanksgiving psalms have a different structure, as may be expected, because they have a different purpose in what they express. The elements of the thanksgiving psalm are as follows:

1. *Introduction*. Here the psalmist's testimony of how God has helped is summarized.
2. *Distress*. The situation from which God gave deliverance is portrayed.
3. *Appeal*. The psalmist reiterates the appeal that has been made to God.
4. *Deliverance*. The deliverance God provided is described.
5. *Testimony*. A word of praise for God's mercy is given.

As you can see from this outline, the thanksgiving psalms

concentrate on appreciation for past mercies. A thanksgiving psalm usually thanks God for what he has already done. The order of these five elements may vary considerably, however — after all, this kind of outline is our discovery, not a rigid form a psalmist felt compelled to fit the musical poem into. A firmly fixed order would unduly limit the creativity of the inspired author.

Psalm 138

[1]I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart;
before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
[2]I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name
for your unfailing love and your faithfulness,
for you have so exalted your solemn decree
that it surpasses your fame.
[3]When I called, you answered me;
you greatly emboldened me.

4 May all the kings of the earth praise you, LORD,
when they hear what you have decreed.
5 May they sing of the ways of the LORD,
for the glory of the LORD is great.
6 Though the LORD is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly;
though lofty, he sees them from afar.
7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life;
you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes,
with your right hand you save me.
8 The LORD will vindicate me;
your love, LORD, endures forever —
do not abandon the works of your hands.

In this psalm, the five elements of a thanksgiving psalm are to be identified as follows:

1. *Introduction*. In verses 1 – 2 David expresses his intention to praise God for the love and faithfulness he has shown, as well as for the fact that God's greatness in and of itself deserves acclamation.
2. *Distress*. In verse 3 the distress is unspecified — it may be any sort of difficulty in which David called to the Lord. Accordingly, the psalm is of use to any Christian who wishes to thank God for any sort of help.
3. *Appeal*. The appeal is also contained in verse 3. God is praised for having graciously responded to David's (unspecified) distress.
4. *Deliverance*. Here verses 6 – 7 are most pertinent. The fact that God paid attention to David, an undeserving supplicant, preserved his life in the midst of trouble (perhaps many times, since "preserve" is in the present tense), and rescued him from his "foes" serves to express for us our own appreciation for God's faithful help to us in the past.
5. *Testimony*. Verses 4 – 5 and 8 all constitute David's (and our) testimonial to God's goodness. God is so beneficent that he deserves praise from even the great of the earth (vv. 4 – 5). God may be counted on and appealed to in connection with carrying out his promises and intentions. God's love never stops (v. 8).

What grand expectations of our relationship to God a thanksgiving song like Psalm 138 contains! How useful it can be in marshaling our own thoughts and feelings when we reflect on the faithfulness God has shown us over the years.

If you wish to pursue the contents of other types of psalms than those discussed here, you will find either Anderson's or Longman's book helpful. Many of the same results can be obtained, however, from simply reading several psalms of a given type and then analyzing on your own the common characteristics they contain. The most important thing is to realize that the psalms do differ from one another, and that a wise discernment of the types will lead to a wise use of the psalms themselves.

A SPECIAL NOTE ON THE "IMPRECATORY PSALMS"

One reason the psalms have had so much appeal to God's people in all ages is their comprehensiveness of language. A full range of human emotion, even extreme emotion, is found. No matter how sad you are, the psalmist helps you express your sadness, with abject pathos if necessary (e.g., Ps 69:7 – 20; 88:3 – 9). No matter how glad you are, the psalmist helps you express that as well (e.g., Ps 23:5 – 6; 98; 133). The obviously exaggerated language (hyperbole) is hard to outdo!

Neither sadness nor gladness, of course, is sinful. But bitterness, anger, and hatred may lead one to sinful thoughts or actions, such as the desire or the attempt to harm others. It is surely true that expressing one's anger verbally — letting it out in words directly, as it were — is better than letting it out in violent actions. Parts of certain psalms help us in just this way, and with an added dimension. They guide or channel our anger *to and through* God verbally rather than to or at anyone else — verbally or physically. Psalms that contain verbalizations to God of anger at others are sometimes called imprecatory

psalms.

Why deny that we sometimes have such anger toward others? Through the imprecatory psalms, God invites us "in your anger, do not sin" (Ps 4:4, as cited in Eph. 4:26). We must fulfill the New Testament teaching, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Eph 4:26 – 27), by expressing our anger directly to and through God rather than by seeking to return evil to those who have done evil to us. Imprecatory psalms harness our anger and help us express it (to God) by using the same sorts of obvious, purposeful exaggeration known to us from other types of psalms.

The imprecatory parts of psalms are almost always found in laments. Psalm 3, described in detail above, contains in verse 7 an imprecation that, like most others found in the book of Psalms, is brief and therefore not likely to be highly offensive. But some imprecations are rather lengthy and harsh (see parts of Pss 12; 35; 58; 59; 69; 70; 83; 109; 137; 140). Consider, for example, Psalm 137:7 – 9:

> 7 Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did
> on the day Jerusalem fell.
> "Tear it down," they cried,
> "tear it down to its foundations!"
> 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to
destruction,

happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.

9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.

Psalm 137 is a lament for the suffering endured by the Israelites in the exile; their capital, Jerusalem, had been destroyed, and their land had been taken from them by the Babylonians, aided and encouraged by the Edomites (cf. the book of Obadiah), who greedily helped themselves to the spoils. Heeding God's word, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Deut 32:35; cf. Rom 12:19) the composer of this lament calls for judgment *according to the covenant curses* (see the discussion in ch. 10). Included in these curses is provision for the annihilation of the whole wicked society, including family members (Deut 32:25; cf. Deut 28:53 – 57). Nothing in Scripture teaches, of course, that this *temporal* judgment should be seen as indicating anything about the *eternal* destiny of such family members.

What the psalmist has done here is to tell God about the feelings of the suffering Israelites, using hyperbolic language of the same extreme sort found in the covenant curses themselves. The fact that the psalmist seems to be addressing the Babylonians directly is simply a function of the style of the psalm — he also addresses Jerusalem directly in verse 5. It is God who is the actual hearer of these angry words (v. 7), just as it should be God, and God alone, who hears *our* angry words. Understood in their context as part of the language of the

laments and used rightly to channel and control our potentially sinful anger, the imprecatory psalms can indeed help keep us from harboring or displaying anger against others (see Matt 5:22).

The imprecatory psalms do not contradict Jesus' teaching to love our enemies. We tend wrongly to equate "love" with "having a warm feeling toward." Jesus' teaching, however, defines love actively. It is not so much how you *feel* about a certain person but what you *do* for that person that shows love (Luke 10:25 – 37). The biblical command is to *do* love, rather than to *feel* love. In a related way, the imprecatory psalms help us, when we feel anger, not to do anger. We may honestly express our anger to God, no matter how bitterly and hatefully we feel it, and let God take care of justice against those who misuse us. The foe who continues to do evil in the face of our forbearance is in big trouble indeed (Rom 12:20). The proper function of these psalms, then, is to help us not to be "overcome by evil" but to free us from our anger, that we might "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).

A final word: The term "hate" in the book of Psalms has been commonly misunderstood. While this Hebrew word does in some contexts mean "despise," it can also mean "be unwilling or unable to put up with" or "reject" (as God toward Esau in Mal 1:3). Both are standard definitions in the Hebrew lexicons for this word. Thus when the psalmist says, "I have nothing but hatred for them" (Ps 139:22), he is expressing in the strongest possible way his utter dismay and inability to put up with those who hate God. Therefore, on this account as well there should be no presumption that the language of the imprecatory psalms violates the Bible's teaching elsewhere, including Matthew 5:22, nor that it offers us a loophole to hate

someone in the usual English sense of the word “hate.”

SOME CONCLUDING HERMENEUTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Since Christians for generations have almost instinctively turned to the Psalter in times of need, perplexity, or joy, we hesitate to offer a “hermeneutics of the psalms,” lest we somehow make them too pedestrian. Nonetheless, some observations are in order — hopefully so as to make them still a greater joy to read, sing, or pray.

First, we should note that the Christian “instinct” (common sense) just alluded to provides the basic answer to the question with which we began this chapter: How do these words spoken *to* God function for us as a word *from* God? The answer: Precisely in the ways they functioned for Israel in the first place — as opportunities to speak to God with the help of words he inspired others to use to speak to him in times past.

Three Basic Benefits of the Psalms

From the use of the psalms both in ancient Israel and in the New Testament church, we can see three important ways in which Christians can use them.

First, *the psalms can serve as a guide to worship*. By this we mean that the worshiper who seeks to praise God or to appeal to God or to remember God’s benefits can use the

psalms as a formal means of expression of his or her thoughts and feelings. A psalm is a carefully composed literary preservation of words designed to be spoken. When a psalm touches on a topic or a theme that we wish to express to the Lord, it can help us express our concerns in spite of our own lack of skill to find the right words.

Second, *the psalms demonstrate to us how we can relate honestly to God* — how to be honest and open in expressing joy, disappointment, anger, or other emotions. On this point they do not so much provide doctrinal instruction as they give, by example, instruction in the godly articulation of even our strongest feelings.

Third, *the psalms demonstrate the importance of reflection and meditation on that which God has done for us.* They invite us to prayer, to controlled thinking on and discussion of God's Word (that is what meditation is), and to reflective fellowship with other believers. Such actions help shape in us a life of purity and charity. The Psalms, like no other literature, lift us to a position where we can commune with God, capturing a sense of the greatness of his kingdom and a sense of what living with our heavenly Father for eternity will be like. Even in our darkest moments, when life has become so painful as to seem unendurable, God is with us. "Out of the depths" (Ps 130:1) we wait and watch for the Lord's deliverance, knowing we can trust God in spite of our feelings. To cry to God for help is not a judgment on God's faithfulness but an affirmation of it.

A Caution

We conclude this chapter with a very important caution: *The psalms do not guarantee a pleasant life.* It is a misunderstanding — an overliteralization — of the language of

the psalms to infer from some of them that God promises to make his believers happy and their lives trouble-free. David, who expresses in the book of Psalms God's blessing in the strongest terms, lived a life that was filled with frequent tragedy and disappointment, as 1 and 2 Samuel describe. Yet he praises and thanks God enthusiastically at every turn, even in laments, just as Paul advises us to do, even in the midst of hard times (Col 1:12; 2:7; 3:17). Our heavenly Father deserves praise for his greatness and goodness in spite of and in the midst of our misery. This life holds no certainty of freedom from distress.