

Week 2 Commentary

Psalms of Praise

Psalm 66:1-12. *To the choirmaster. A Song. A Psalm.* Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name.” Selah Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

Psalm 104:1-4: Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.

Psalm 113:1-9. Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised! The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts

the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!

Psalms 149:1-9. Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly! Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation. Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written! This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the Lord!

Commentary on Praise Psalms

Psalms that proclaim the greatness and goodness of God and praise him are called *hymns*. There is a whole range of motives for praising God—his omnipotence and wondrous works as seen in nature and human history, or his help on some particular occasion, such as victory over enemies or rainfall in times of drought. As has been already pointed out, it is not easy to distinguish a hymn of praise from a thanksgiving psalm. Also, praise is offered to God when Zion is lauded—the city where he dwells; or when the king he has established there is praised; or when the Law, his great gift to his people, is being extolled. (**Ibid.** Gavigan p. 24)

Many of these hymns begin with a *call to praise* in the imperative plural, summoning the assembled community to praise the Lord (33:1–3; 66:1–4; 100:1–3a; 105:1–6; 111:1; 113:1–3; 117:1; 135:1–3; 136:1a; 146–50). This imperative makes clear the congregational setting for these psalms. Following the call to praise (113:1–3; 117:1) are *reasons* for the praise (113:4–6; 117:2),

which may include God's might and majesty (113:4–5) as well as God's mercy in caring for individual persons (113:6–9).

Royal Psalms

Psalms 21:1-7. *To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.* O Lord, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults! You have given him his heart's desire and have not withheld the request of his lips. Selah For you meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold upon his head. He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever. His glory is great through your salvation; splendor and majesty you bestow on him. For you make him most blessed forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence. For the king trusts in the Lord, and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved.

72:1-4. *Of Solomon.* Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!

72:5-11: May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! May they fear you while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations! May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth! In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more! May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!

Psalm 132:8-12. “Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool!” Arise, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your saints shout for joy. For the sake of your servant David, do not turn away the face of your anointed one. The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: “One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne.”

Commentary on the Royal Psalms

These are psalms composed for an event connected with the life of the king. Included are Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 110; 132; and 144:1–11. Psalm 45 was written for a royal wedding. Psalm 2 was intended for a king’s coronation, a time when the vassal nations would be considering rebellion (vv. 1–3). Psalm 18 is a royal thanksgiving, in which the king expresses gratitude for a victory in battle (vv. 6–19, 31–45). Psalm 20 is a prayer for the king’s victory before battle; Psalm 21 gives thanks for answered prayers (vv. 1–7) and promises future victories (vv. 8–12). Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, probably at the time of his coronation or at its anniversary. Psalm 89 is a lament, a prayer for deliverance from enemies. In Psalm 101 the king promises to rule with loyalty and justice. Psalm 110 again fits a coronation setting. Psalm 132 recalls the divine choice of the Davidic line (vv. 11–12, 17–18) and of Zion (vv. 13–16). In Ps 110:1–4 the king prays for victory.

The royal psalms originated during the period of the Monarchy and functioned during that period. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 b.c., they took on another significance, projecting into the future a description of an ideal king to come, the concept of Messiah.¹

¹ Limburg, J. (1992). [Psalms, Book of](#). In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 5, p. 533). Doubleday.

Songs of Zion

Psalms 48:1-3. A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain,

The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: “One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne.” For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place: “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread. Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy. There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine.”

Psalms 48:8-14. As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever. Selah We have thought on your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. As your name, O God, so your praise reaches to the ends of the earth. Your right hand is filled with righteousness. Let Mount Zion be glad! Let the daughters of Judah rejoice because of your judgments! Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.

Psalms 132:13-18. The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: “One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne.” For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place: “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will

satisfy her poor with bread. Her priests I will clothe with salvation, and her saints will shout for joy. There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. His enemies I will clothe with shame, but on him his crown will shine.”

Commentary on Songs of Zion

Hymns to Zion (Jerusalem), or “songs of Zion”, praise the Holy City because it is there that God dwells and because he protects it (cf. Ps 46; 48; 76; 87). These psalms celebrate the Lord’s choice of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem as the earthly center of the Lord’s presence. These Songs of Zion (for this title, see 137:3) include 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122 (cf. also 132:13). The original context of these psalms may have been some feast or some pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their subject matter links them to the *Songs of Ascents* (cf. Ps 84; 95; 120–134) and to *ProceSSIONAL hymns*, whose structure is based on a dialogue between those arriving at the temple and the guardians thereof (cf. Ps 15; 24; 46; 68; 132). (**Ibid.** Gavigan p. 25)

Psalms Used in Liturgy.

Psalm 24:3-10. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah

Psalm 95: 1-11. Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.” Therefore I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.”

Psalm 121:1-8. *A Song of Ascents.* I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Commentary on Liturgy Psalms

Liturgies. Psalms designed for use as devotional songs in liturgies or which associate liturgical action with the words of the psalm are called Liturgies. Here may be included Psalms 15, 24, 50, (68), 81, (82), 95, 115, 132. Psalm 15 appears to have functioned as a liturgy for entrance into the temple area, with the worshipper asking the question in v 1, “O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent?” and the priest responding with the answer in vv 2–5, “He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right ...”

Psalm 24 starts with the worshipper's question in v 3, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?" and the answer in vv. 4–6, "He who has clean hands and a pure heart ..." This psalm appears to be associated with a procession, probably including the ark. Those outside the temple area make the request, "Lift up your heads, O gates ... that the King of glory may come in." Those inside respond with the question, "Who is this King of glory?" and the first group replies, "The Lord, strong and mighty ..." (vv. 7–8). The same exchange is then repeated in vv. 9–10.

Psalm 95 appears to be connected with a procession (vv. 1–2) which culminates in bowing before the Lord (v 6). Once again, a divine word spoken by a cultic official calls for obedience (7b–11).

As one of the "Pilgrimage Psalms," Psalm 121 appears to have been used as a liturgy for travelers, with those going on a journey reciting vv. 1–2 and those remaining at home speaking the words of encouragement and blessing in vv. 3–8.

Wisdom and Torah Psalms

Psalm 19:7-14. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalm 37:1-9. *Of David.* Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

Psalm 127:1-7. *A Song of Ascents. Of Solomon.* Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate.

Psalm 128. *A Song of Ascents.* Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord. The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!

Commentary on the Wisdom and Torah Psalms.

The Lord is also praised when his Law is extolled. Although wisdom psalms do not have the formal features of the hymns, some of them are regarded as being close to hymns insofar as they proclaim the excellence of the divine Law (cf. Ps 19:7–14) and the benefits man derives from adhering to it (cf. Ps 1; 34; 112; 119). They are also called “*didactic psalms*” because they evidence the teaching (cf. Ps 37; 49; 78; 127; 128; etc.) and the composition skills (cf. Ps 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145) of a wise man. (**Ibid.** Gavigan)

One does not hear the tones of either lament or praise in the Wisdom Psalms; for the most part, they are not even addressed to God. Rather, they offer reflections on the possibilities and the problems of life before God and advice on how best to live that life. In so doing, they are linked with the biblical Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes). Wisdom Literature in the Bible is represented by two basic kinds of materials: the short saying (as found in Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus) and the longer, reflective essay or drama (Ecclesiastes, Job). Both types are represented in the psalms.

Psalms 19 is likewise identified as a meditation (v 14). The first part is a hymn like affirmation of God the Creator, and the second part revels in the desirability of the Lord’s instruction (*tôrâ*, testimony, precepts, etc.), described as “sweeter than honey.”

Psalms 37 (in the acrostic form) presents the thoughts of an older person (v 25) to one who is discouraged because of the apparent triumphs of the wrongdoers. (**See Handout – Acrostic Psalms or Poems**)

Psalms 127, 128, and 133 are each made up of short sayings, reflecting on such everyday themes as piety and daily work (127:1; 128:1–2), the balance between work and rest (127:2), and the blessings of life together as a family (127:3–5; 128). (**Ibid.** Limburg pp. 531-534)

In summary, we can see that it is helpful to bear in mind, insofar as possible, the literary type or genre of each psalm in order to appreciate its form and content better. But we should also note that each psalm has its own originality, since it reflects the skill of its composer, and also the composer's personal situation in relation to God and a whole range of feelings. Each psalm, therefore, should be read as a separate item, by a particular individual speaking, in a particular set of circumstances that can be deduced from the text itself. (*Ibid.* Gavigan pp. 25-26)

The Religious Message and Theology of the Psalms

The Psalter is basically a prayer book and a book in praise of God, every poem of which, in some way or another, speaks to or about God. Moreover, each psalm stands alone; each psalm has things to say about who God is and what he is for the person who is praying—about how the person in the presence of God sees herself or himself and the world around them and how they see themselves in relation to God. The psalms also articulate the religious feeling of the chosen people, from the time of the monarchy up to the last stage of the Old Testament; and they always do this in harmony with the Law and the Prophets, for otherwise the Psalter would not have found its way into the canon of Scripture.

Special features of the Psalms in the overall context of Revelation

Through the psalms God speaks to his people, not only by way of the oracles that are to be found in some of them or by the invitation, extended in others, to follow the Law, but also insofar as the psalms are inspired prayers placed by God on the lips and in the hearts of those who compose and recite them.

“The Psalter is the book in which the Word of God becomes man's prayer. In other books of the Old Testament, ‘the words proclaim [God's] works and

bring to light the mystery they contain' (*Dei Verbum*, 2). The words of the Psalmist, sung for God, both express and acclaim the Lord's saving works; the same Spirit inspires both God's work and man's response. Christ will unite the two. In him, the Psalms continue to teach us how to pray." (CCC 2587) St Ambrose comments: "History gives instruction and the law teaches, prophecies announce, reprimands correct, and moral teaching counsels; the book of Psalms is a compendium of all these and offers the balm of a spiritual medicine to all." (St Ambrose, *Enarrationes in XII Psalmos*, 1, 7.)

Going Deeper – Getting the most out of the Psalms

In the psalms we find a reflection of the entire Revelation of God to ancient Israel, and Israel's response to that Revelation. Taken as a whole, the Psalter puts before us all the main themes of Revelation, while each of the psalms in it reflects features of salvation events and the situations in which people found themselves. The religious dimension of the psalms can be appreciated, therefore, only through reading and meditating on each poem. However, the psalms have features that are common to them all—dimensions that are in some way present right through the book; and we shall now try to summarize these. The fact that these features are found in the form of prayers means that we can set them in the context most appropriate to them, that is, dialogue between God and man; the ultimate purpose of God's Revelation is "to invite and receive men and women into his own company".

Although the history of the formation of the book allows us to identify religious features that it acquired as the collection was built up (the personal relationship of the individual with God, features connected with wisdom and worship, liturgical dimensions), the book as we have it is a unit which, better than any other Old Testament book, reveals the faith and spirituality of Israel—a faith that was

forged over the years, as people meditated on God's interventions in the history of Israel; and a spirituality that developed out of practicing their faith in all sorts of circumstances. That is why the book of Psalms is the best place in the Old Testament to learn about how God works and to discover who he is and what man's position is in relation to him. (**Ibid.** Gavigan pp. 28-29)