Psalms: The Prayer Book of God’s People

1. What do we already know about the book of Psalms?

- It’s at approximately the center of the Bible.
- It’s the Biblical book with the most chapters (150).
- Many of the Psalms were written by David.
- There are several well-known passages from the Psalms, including Psalm 23 (“The Lord is My Shepherd,”) and Psalm 103 (“Bless the Lord, Oh My Soul”) and others.
- Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible.

2. Bible Project video: [https://youtu.be/jqphNEaPrv8](https://youtu.be/jqphNEaPrv8)

3. Structure of Psalms

The collector of the Psalms (see below) has grouped the Psalms in 5 books. The books have been characterized differently by different scholars, but there is clear agreement that the 5 books were gathered as they are purposefully. Most would see Psalm 1-2 as some sort of introduction, and the final 5 Psalms (146-150) as a broad conclusion to the collection.

4. Who Collected the Psalms? Why?

Judging from the content of the Psalms, the collector of the Psalms is aware of the captivity of Judah in Babylon, which means that the collection can’t have been finalized until AFTER the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC.

From that piece of data, it seems likely that the collection was pulled together from a group of preexisting materials for the purpose of serving as the prayer book of the exiles. Given the number of songs of lament in the collection, we might see further evidence that it was meant for the exiles.

5. Categories of Psalms

Scholars have spilled lots of ink over the past few centuries trying to identify categories that the Psalms would seem to fit in. Some of these are based on specific hints in the texts, and some are based on the content of the Psalms themselves. Broadly speaking, here are a few of these generally accepted categories, and some examples of each type:

- **Individual Lament** (Psalm 13)
- **Communal Lament** (Psalm 44)
- **Individual Praise** (Psalm 34)
- **Communal Praise** (Psalm 100)

In addition to these types, there are some smaller categories: *Songs of Zion* (songs about Jerusalem and/or the Temple; Ps. 48 is an example), *Royal Psalms* (about the King; Ps. 21), *Songs of Ascent* (sometimes called Pilgrimage Psalms; see Ps. 120-134). Many of the Psalms also have musical, biographical or historical information at the beginning to explain them.

6. What is THAT Doing There?

One of the things that makes the Psalms unique is that it gives voice to emotions and feelings that are not given voice elsewhere in Scripture, or are spoken negatively of. What do we make of the presence of these negative, unwelcomed emotions in the Psalms?
To pick an extreme example, Psalm 137:7-9 seems to incite harm upon the children of the nation of Edom, going so far as to suggested that those who destroy their children should be happy (137:9). What? Surely the Scriptures aren't encouraging infanticide here. So what gives?

In the context of Psalm 137, it is a song of grief from those who have been exiled. In their grief they are remembering the harms done to them by the people of Edom, who came and cheered Babylon on as the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and aided in destroying and plundering the city (see Ezekiel 35, Obadiah, especially v.10-18). In that state of grief, they are speaking out loud their desire for vengeance and justice. Do they really expect God to bless the destruction of babies? Probably not. But they are being honest before God with their grief, anger and desire for retribution.

The key lesson we draw from this and other examples is that honesty before God is welcomed. We can cry out to God honestly without having to edit our inner most thoughts as though God was not aware of them. We can be honest, but in venting that emotion, we are also opening ourselves up to God’s person. When we do that, the healing of God follows before and behind. If you check out Psalms 136 and 138, you discover that the former focuses on a repeating chorus of “for his steadfast love endures forever,” through a historical survey and the latter focuses on the reality of God’s sovereignty and goodness. History has made the collector of the Psalms remember their grief, but they don’t stay there—they immediately go on to remind us God is in control.

7. The Forgotten Art of Lament: When Grief Finds Words

It is at this point that two things become very important to remember:

- This is a prayer book. It is meant to model the sorts of devotional thoughts the people of God are to have.
- This is all in poetic form. It is densely packed with meaning which has to be mined to be extracted.

In other words, if we believe that all Scripture is God-breathed, and this is included, we will need to do more than a drive-by to receive the full benefit of this material!

There is one other point here. A significant portion (some have argued as much as 70%) of the Psalms is lament. Where is the place of lament in our regular activity as followers of God? You might argue that this sort of outpouring is “just for the Old Testament.” But if that is so, why does the New Testament quote the Psalms more than any other book (68 times)? Why does Jesus quote the Psalms (11 times) more than any other book, including when he is dying on the cross (Compare Psalm 22:1 to Matthew 27:46; Compare Psalm 31:5 to Luke 23:46)?

A modern CCM artist made waves several years ago when he asked the correct question: where are the songs of lament in our modern worship? If you scan the list of most popular praise and worship songs for most of the past two decades, the list is totally devoid of real songs of lament. This is a deficit in our spiritual walks which has consequences, as when we are faced with tragedy and difficulty, we do not have the ability to put words to our grief, sometimes with terrible consequences, instead demanding that people do only the more “positive and upbeat” things while their souls are in grief. This is bad practice and has bad consequences to mental health and to real community inside the body of Christ.


This is strange homework, but as you depart from class today into a Sabbath day, I would like to encourage to you ask yourself these questions: Do you know how to lament? When was the last time you lamented something? If you can think of an example, how long did you spend lamenting? Did you feel like you had permission to do that? Why or why not? How did the people around you react to your lament? Do you feel free to lament before God? Why or why not? What does this say about you and us?