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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 05: PSALMS – 1

BIBLICAL READINGS:

Read the citations given from the book of Psalms as you study the units on this book.

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Download a copy of the textbook for this unit: *Spotlight on the Psalms* from the CornerstoneCourses.org website, or from FreeChristianEbooks.org. The book is free to download. Readings are given below.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS:

The book of Psalms, or the “Psalter” as it is sometimes called, is one of the most important and best-loved books of the Bible. Among Christians, it is the most-read book of the Old Testament, and there is no doubt that Psalms must be considered the most important of the five books generally classified as Wisdom Literature. As a result, we will look in detail at this book by means of selected readings from the course textbook, which will be expanded upon by the material given in this unit. Before proceeding, read the “Introduction” in the course textbook *Spotlight on the Psalms*, which covers the background, authorship, and main types of compositions found in the book of Psalms.

THE PSALMS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT:

Our understanding of the Psalms can be considerably increased through knowledge of the parallel forms of songs, laments, praises, and other types of religious poetry in the ancient Near East – the “church music” of that day! While we do not have the music to which these compositions were performed, we do have the lyrics, and we can profitably compare them to Israel’s psalms.

Texts recording praises and prayers made to various gods date back to close to the origin of writing. Ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian prayers deal with many of the same topics and show many of the concerns found in the Hebrew psalms, and there are numerous similarities in structure, imagery, and even specific expressions between the parallel texts from the ancient Near East and the hymns and prayers of the Old Testament. Also, just as the book of Psalms represents a collection of songs composed and organized over the course of a thousand years of Israel’s history, there is evidence of ancient Near Eastern collections of hymns to deities and their temples – in one case showing evidence that a later song was added to the collection, just as occurred with Psalms.

Importantly, as we will see, many of the songs and hymns of the nations surrounding ancient Israel exhibit clear concerns with the “wisdom” topics that form the basis of many of the psalms, and especially those often specifically called “wisdom psalms.”

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALMS:

The so-called wisdom psalms use the same literary forms and structures as the other compositions in the book, but some of these are particularly well suited for the teaching purposes of wisdom writings – especially the techniques of poetic parallelism, chiasm, and acrostic:

Parallelism

The wisdom psalms utilize all three of the types of parallelism discussed in Unit 2: Background – as we see from the following examples in Psalm 37:

Synonymous:

Do not fret because of those who are evil
or be envious of those who do wrong. (Psalm 37:1)

Antithetic:

The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously. (Psalm 37:21)

Synthetic:

The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just. (Psalm 37:30)

Chiasm

Another notable aspect of Wisdom Literature, and especially the Psalms, is the use of the “chiasm” or “crossover” form in which subjects and ideas are repeated, but in the opposite order. Notice how, in the following example, the request for God’s mercy according to his love is repeated with only slight variation in the reverse order:

[A] Have mercy on me, O God,
 [B]according to your unfailing love;
 [B]according to your great compassion,
[A] blot out my transgressions. (Psalm 51:1)

This kind of structure is similar to synonymous parallelism but is often more extended. In fact, chiasm can be seen not only in individual verses, but also in the structure of the whole composition, as we see in Psalm 8, one of the wisdom psalms:

[A] Praise (verse 1)
 [B] God’s Rule (verses 2-3)
 [C] Human smallness (verse 4)
 [C] Human greatness (verse 5)
 [B] Human rule (verses 6-8)
[A] Praise (verse 9)

To identify chiastic structure in psalms and to profit from it, first look to see if there are common words or ideas in the first and last verses of the psalm that frame the composition. Then, look at the center of the psalm to determine the key principle or principles that the psalm teaches.

Perhaps surprisingly for many Bible readers, chiasm is also found in the arrangement of material in several adjoining psalms (see Note 1) and even in whole collections of psalms within the book of Psalms as a whole. Psalms contains five individual “books” or collections (probably to mirror the five books of the Law), and chiastic arrangement can be found in all five of them. Notice, for example, the arrangement of chapters 1-14 in the first “book” of Psalms (Psalms 1-41):

- [A] Wisdom and Foolishness (Psalms 1-2)
- [B] Five Laments (Psalms 3-7)
- [C] Hymn of praise (Psalm 8)
- [B] Five Laments (Psalms 9-13)
- [A] Wisdom and Foolishness (Psalm 14)

Just as understanding the chiastic structure of individual psalms helps us to better grasp their message, understanding the chiastic arrangement of multiple psalms can help us better see the key points of the whole group – something we might easily miss.

Acrostic

The final structural aspect of the Wisdom Literature we will note is that of the “acrostic” arrangement in which each verse begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet – for example, Psalm 119. This pattern made the composition easier to remember and recite, and some wisdom psalms – Psalms 37, 111, and 112 – probably utilize an acrostic structure for this reason. However, the pattern also indicates completeness in its all-inclusive *aleph* to *tav* (“A to Z”) sequence, as we will see.



King David by Adamo Tadolini, 1788 -1863

KEYS FOR INTERPRETING THE PSALMS:

1. The Psalms are not just about David.

We all tend to think of King David when we think of the Psalms. Although David composed more psalms than any other individual – 73 bear his name and he apparently composed a number of the others – we need to remind ourselves that these compositions span a time period of over one thousand years. At least six other authors including Moses, Solomon, and the individuals known as the Sons of Korah also composed psalms in different time periods, circumstances, and settings. For example, some of the later psalms were composed during or after the Babylonian captivity, and these compositions can only be properly understood in terms of the conditions and events of their time. Background context is particularly important when studying the Psalms.

2. View the Psalms as more than personal.

Psalms is one of the most personal books in the Bible – it talks about life in an intensely personal way that resonates with our own emotional and social struggles, tragedies and triumphs. Anyone who has looked into the night sky and experienced the same wonder that David expressed in Psalm 8 or felt the same remorse that he describes in Psalm 51 cannot fail to view the Psalms personally, too. This is good, of course, but if we are to understand many of the psalms, we must remind ourselves that although they may apply to us in some ways, they apply more frequently – and importantly – to the life of Jesus Christ which they frequently foreshadow. Jesus both began and concluded his earthly ministry by fulfilling prophecies from the Psalms (John 2:17 = Psalm 69:9; Luke 23:46 = Psalm 31:5), and we should keep their relevance to his life firmly in mind as we study them.

3. Remember that in the Psalms, poetry takes precedence.

Even though we may know intellectually that the psalms are written in poetic form, it is not always easy to actually see some of the things they say as being poetic rather than literal. For example, if we read Psalm 57:10, “great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies,” we have no difficulty understanding that in both parts of this expression the psalmist is speaking poetically rather than in a literal manner. In the same way, when we read Psalm 42:1, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God,” we have no real problem seeing that the first half of the statement is literal – deer really do “pant” for water – while the second half of the statement is poetic. But in many cases we may tend to take poetic statements literally. This is especially true of the so-called “imprecatory” psalms we will mention next. On the other hand, we must be careful not to dismiss poetic language as not having *significance* just because it is poetic.

4. Understand the imprecatory psalms.

Psalms of this type are named from the verb “imprecate,” meaning “to place a curse on,” as they invoke judgement, punishment or curses on – and seem to express hatred for – those they are directed against. The most severe is Psalm 109:6-13 which appears to heap curses on an enemy of David. Modern Christians often read these psalms wondering how their apparent hatred could possibly reflect the mind of a true follower of God, but there are several reasons why these psalms are not what they might seem and need not be as problematic as they appear. Because of their difficult nature, the imprecatory psalms will be covered in detail in the next unit, but we mention them here to make the point that awareness of these compositions is a vital part of understanding the Psalms as a whole.

5. Understand opposing viewpoints.

Many psalms teach a clear message that it will be well with the righteous. For example, Psalm 1 tells us that the person who delights in God's law is "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers" (Psalm 1:3), while, by contrast, the wicked are "like chaff that the wind blows away" (vs. 4).

Other psalms teach just as clearly that it is often not well with those who do right. For example, Psalm 73 speaks openly of the suffering of the righteous and the success of sinners. This is not a contradiction, but shows the wide range of circumstances and conditions that make up life. Psalms recognizes in particular that blessings and curses can be short-lived and that things do change. Overall, however, many of the psalms – and especially those of David – begin in despair end in hope. Both are true to life and both emotions are given voice, but Psalms makes clear that hope eventually wins.

6. The Psalms focus on God's wisdom.

While some wisdom writings – especially the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – often discuss aspects of human wisdom, in Psalms wisdom is specifically said to come from three sources: the Law of God, the deeds of God, and the fear of God. For example: "The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7), "Let the one who is wise ... ponder the loving deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 107:43), "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10).

This is important to remember because some verses in Psalms may seem to contradict verses in Proverbs on the subject of wisdom. The wisdom psalms also differ from other compositions in the Psalter as they were not designed for cultic, musical use (see Note 2), but for instruction in happiness. Psalms also stresses that true happiness comes only from the application of God's wisdom – that is, through holiness.

* Note 1: Instances where chiasmic structure is clear in two consecutive psalms show that these psalms were probably originally composed as paired compositions. Compare, for example, the structure of Psalms 1 and 2:

[A1] The Wise Man (Psalm 1:1-3)

[B1] The Foolish Man (Psalm 1:4-6)

[B2] The Foolish Nation (Psalm 2:1-3)

[A2] The Wise Nation (Psalm 2:10-12)

Such pairing of psalms is also demonstrated by compositions such as Psalms 9 and 10 which are linked together by an acrostic pattern – having lines with the first half of the alphabet in Psalm 9 and the other half in Psalm 10.

* Note 2: Note that while the expression "For the chief musician" occurs as the heading of some of the wisdom psalms, this is an error. In the earliest Hebrew copies the individual psalms were not separated, and early translators mistakenly took the expression "for the chief musician" to be the first line of many psalms. However, the ancient Greek Septuagint version and the content of the psalms themselves show that this expression was actually the last line of the previous psalm.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Background Basics

1. What is a wisdom psalm?
2. What does Psalms teach regarding the suffering of the righteous?
3. In what ways does recognizing the chiasmic structure of many of the psalms help us to better see the main points being made in those compositions?

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