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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WISDOM LITERATURE

UNIT 06: PSALMS – 2

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.

TYPES OF PSALMS:

When we read the book of Psalms, it is not difficult to see that the collection contains compositions with a number of types of themes. For example, Psalm 65 is clearly a psalm of praise. Over a third of the 150 psalms in the Psalter are psalms of praise, and the word “praise” itself appears over two hundred times in most translations of the book, so praise is unquestionably a major theme in Psalms. Most of the book’s compositions can be categorized in terms of such themes.

Yet there is also an overlapping of topics in some of the compositions, so lists of themes in the Psalms often vary to some extent. *Spotlight on the Psalms* looks at six of the most prominent themes – wisdom, protection, praise, prayer, kingship, and prophecy – and the first assignment in this unit is to read the short introductions to these types of psalms given at the beginning of each section of the book (for example, “Wisdom in the Psalms” at the beginning of “Part 1: Wisdom”). If you wish, you can also read the various examples given in each section as they will help you get a clear idea of the range within a given type of psalm, but the introductory notes to each type should be read before proceeding with this unit.

We will only look at one of the categories discussed in *Spotlight on the Psalms* here – that of wisdom – as knowledge of that category is especially important for understanding the underlying wisdom nature of the book of Psalms and how wisdom actually relates to the other themes found in the book.

THE PSALMS AS WISDOM LITERATURE:

On the surface, the Psalms may not seem like the other books viewed as Wisdom Literature, but that impression is illusory. We tend to think of the Psalms as being more “poetic,” although most of the wisdom writings are composed in a poetic form, as we saw in Unit 2 of this course. There are some other differences that are more apparent than real. While the proverbs, for example, often give their teachings from an anonymous and general perspective – regarding the “wise” or the “foolish” person – the psalms seem much more personal when we look at those that contain David’s prayers, praises, and laments.

However, many psalms *are* written from an anonymous and general perspective (see Psalm 112, for example), and we need to learn to see the similarities between Psalms and the other wisdom books, rather than just their differences.

There is certainly no doubt about the wisdom component of many of the psalms (see Note 1). The words “wise,” “wisely,” and “wisdom” occur frequently in these compositions – sometimes as the specific point the psalm is making, as when we read: “Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth” (Psalm 2:10); “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12); or “Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies” (Psalm 119:98).

In other cases, wisdom may not be mentioned directly, but the psalm may focus on typical wisdom subjects such as the fate of the righteous and the wicked, or the justice and purposes of God. Such psalms are distinguished as much by their clear intent to teach wisdom as by their reflective and meditative nature. Although deciding if a given psalm is a “wisdom psalm” can be somewhat subjective, there is general agreement that the following psalms should be viewed as Wisdom Literature: 1, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 19, 32, 34, 36, 37, 49, 50, 52, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 139. When we examine these wisdom psalms closely, we find that they often contain teachings and principles that are similar – and even almost identical – to those found in the book of Proverbs. Compare, for example, the Psalms’ “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked” (Psalm 37:16) with what Proverbs tells us: “Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice” (Proverbs 16:8). Other psalms resemble wisdom material found in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and even the Song of Songs; the more we learn to recognize these similarities, the more we will understand the wisdom nature of the book of Psalms itself.

THE DIFFICULT THEMES OF PSALMS:

We have already looked at the six basic themes of Psalms covered in *Spotlight on the Psalms*: wisdom, protection, praise, prayer, kingship, and prophecy. In this course unit, we will look at six more themes – ones that some find difficult to understand, but which are vital to a truly deep appreciation of the book.

1. Salvation

The Psalms contain hundreds of references to the law of God – either generally, or specifically referring to his commands, statutes, precepts, decrees, etc. (for example, Psalm 19:7-9). Of itself, there is nothing surprising about this. David wrote “Oh, how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97), and God’s law is clearly a focal theme for most of the writers of the Psalms. What is difficult for some modern readers is the way the law is often spoken of in some of the psalms – seemingly contradicting the New Testament’s teaching that we cannot be saved through the law. In Psalm 119, for example, we read “If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life. Save me, for I am yours; I have sought out your precepts” (Psalm 119:92-94). Verse 156 of this same chapter says “preserve my life according to your laws.”

First, we must realize that many verses such as these appear to be speaking of physical salvation – rescue from enemies or death – in the present life. There is often no reason to assume the writer is talking about spiritual salvation, especially because the surrounding verses so often talk about the psalmist’s physical distress: “Look on my suffering and deliver me” (vs. 153; etc.). We should also remember that the same chapter states “preserve my life according to your promise” (vs. 154) and “preserve my life, LORD, in accordance with your love” (vs. 159) – showing that the psalmist looked to God’s loving promise of salvation rather than his own ability to earn salvation through keeping the law.

2. Righteousness

Righteousness is celebrated throughout the book of Psalms, but in some of these compositions the psalmist seems not only to emphasize his own obedience, but also to attempt to “trade” that obedience for God’s help. For example, in Psalm 119 we read: “Remove from me their scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes” (vs. 22), and “I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors” (vs. 121). But to see these verses in perspective, we need to look equally at those which show the psalmist’s clear knowledge of his need of God’s help in order to be righteous: “Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me” (vs. 133). This psalm ends, in fact, with an admission of failure, yet with the great desire to obey God: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments” (vs. 176 ESV).

So the psalmist was very much aware of his own failures and his need of God’s help in keeping the law. Yet at the same time he knew his desire to keep the law and recognized where God had helped him to be obedient. As a result, Psalm 119 and many others ask God for help to keep the law, not in a physical rote manner, but from the heart: “I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart! ... Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!” (vss. 32, 36 ESV). And there is certainly no understanding of perfect righteousness as being humanly attainable, as we see in Psalm 143: “Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you” (Psalm 143:2).

3. Repentance

Many of the psalms speak of failure to keep the law perfectly and the necessity of repentance. There are seven so-called “penitential psalms” that show this specifically (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143), and many other psalms that speak of various aspects of turning from sin. The spiritual nature of these psalms is such that we can find in them every element of repentance described in New Testament teachings, and these psalms are still used by Christians – thousands of years after they were written – in the heartfelt confession of sin. But that does not mean that the penitential psalms are without difficulties for some in terms of understanding all that they say. Most of the psalms that speak of confession and repentance pray that God will not punish the sinner in some way (Psalm 6:1; etc.); but this is not indicative of the concept of a “harsh Old Testament God” as is sometimes claimed. It is, however, certainly commensurate with the proper and positive fear of God, as we will see.

Yet Psalm 51 – probably the best known and most read psalm of repentance – does contain a statement that sometimes troubles Christians: “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (vs. 11). Many have been concerned that this verse means they could lose God’s Spirit and all contact with God over a single sin, but this is not what is being said. We must remember that David had sinned badly, and he was acutely aware that he had replaced King Saul – of whom we are told “the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul” (1 Samuel 16:13-14). However, Saul’s loss of contact with God was based on ongoing rebellion rather than an instance of repented sin. When read closely, we find that the penitential psalms show an attitude of great confidence and trust in God’s forgiveness (Psalm 130:3-4; etc.).

4. Fear of God

Psalms mentions the fear of the Lord more than any other biblical work – it calls it the very basis of wisdom (Psalm 111:10) – and this same fear is a recurrent theme found throughout the book, so it is vital that it is properly understood. Christians raised on the doctrine of God’s love sometimes wonder why we would fear him if he loves us and wants only good things for us. From this viewpoint, the fear of the Lord is often seen as an Old Testament perspective, but Psalms shows us that this is not the case. Psalms puts the whole

question of the fear of God in proper perspective by showing that it is not abject, negative apprehension, but proper respect based on loving trust that displaces every negative fear: “Blessed are those who fear the Lord ... Their hearts are secure, *they will have no fear*” (Psalm 112:1, 8. emphasis added).

The right fear of God can involve a feeling of overwhelming awe and respect for God’s power – as when the psalmist writes of the wonder of creation (Psalm 33:8-9; etc.), the magnificence of the heavens (Psalm 19:1-6, 9; etc.), or the infant in the womb (Psalm 139:13-14). It is with this sense of awe at God’s power that the psalmist says “If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due” (Psalm 90:11). But Psalms continually shows that this fear of God is no different from the respect young children have for their parents’ ability to punish – it is a fear that should not in any way displace love, trust, or affection. Consider how Psalms shows that God’s ability to punish is matched by his ability and desire to provide, “Fear the LORD, you His holy people, for those who fear Him lack nothing” (Psalm 34:9); to bless, “How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you” (Psalm 31:19); and to reward, “Surely his salvation is near those who fear him” (Psalm 85:9). Psalms shows us, in fact, that the right fear of God cannot be separated from the love of God: “the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love” (Psalm 33:18); “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (Psalm 103:11).

5. Other Gods

Readers of the Bible sometimes find it confusing or even disturbing that a number of the psalms speak of other gods, for example: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (Psalm 82:1 ESV); “There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,” (Psalm 86:8 ESV); and “For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods” (Psalm 96:4 ESV). These psalms might seem to picture other gods as part of a divine council in which Yahweh is the supreme deity – not unlike the pagan Greek idea of Zeus presiding over the gods of Olympus.

But the primary key to understanding these verses is the fact that the Hebrew term *elohim* is used primarily as a title of the One God of Israel (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39), but it sometimes refers to angelic beings (Psalm 8:6; 89:6), the so-called “gods” of the pagan nations (Judges 11:24; 1 Kings 18:24). The term was also occasionally used of human rulers or judges (Exodus 4:16; Exodus 7:1). Given this range of meanings, we can see that it is likely that most of the psalms in question simply refer to God’s preeminence over all created spiritual beings – as Deuteronomy 10:17 puts it, God is the “God of gods” – the “Elohim of elohim.”

It is also possible that some of the psalms referring to other gods are referring to the supposed gods of other nations. It seems likely that many ancient Israelites believed in the existence of other gods such as Dagon or Baal, as archaeological excavations in Israel have uncovered many small household images of these deities. In that sense, the writers of compositions such as Psalm 82 are simply describing God’s powerful rule over other powers – including the imagined gods of other nations. This is not really any different from the poetic way in which the psalmists also speak of mythical creatures, such as Psalm 89:10 which speaks of God crushing the monster “Rahab” that personified chaotic waters. We certainly need not presume that the writers of the psalms took such images literally, rather they were simply using the established imagery of contemporary myths, just as God himself is described in Psalm 68:4 as the “Rider on the clouds” – a common ancient name of the storm god Baal.

We should also remember that Christ himself quoted Psalm 82:6: “I said, ‘You are “gods”’; you are all sons of the Most High” (John 10:34) – showing that the metaphorical usage found in such psalms was acceptable.

6. Imprecation

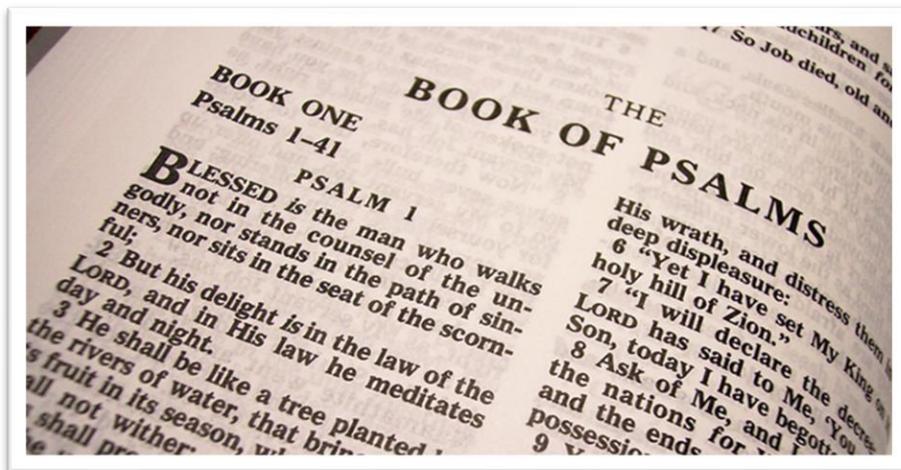
Probably the most difficult group of psalms for many to understand, and the one we will look at most closely here, is that of the “imprecatory” compositions that invoke judgment, punishment, or curses on others. The psalms given this label include 5, 10, 17, 28, 31, 35, 40, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140, and the extreme nature of the curses some of these psalms call down certainly seems to be in diametric opposition to Christ’s command that we love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Apologists have tried to explain these psalms in various ways. The most common rationale is that psalms of this type reflect an “Old Covenant” ethical standard that was replaced with the teachings of Christ. Other approaches suggest that the curses found in these psalms are simply stating what would eventually happen to the wicked rather than wishing evil on them, or that they were “cathartic” – intended for the release of frustration (we might say “blowing off steam”). These, and similar theories, are alike in that they fail to explain why these psalms exhibit such an unchristian attitude.

But there is another and perhaps better explanation for the imprecatory psalms that focuses on the fact that many of these compositions have a context of false accusation. For example, in Psalm 109 the curses are preceded with the statement: “... people who are wicked and deceitful have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me ...” (Psalm 109:2-4 and see vs. 31). In the same way, after reciting the curses of this psalm, the psalmist exclaims: “May this be the Lord’s payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me” (Psalm 109:20). It is known that in many cultures of the ancient Near East, curses were invoked on those who acted as false witnesses. If the imprecatory psalms follow this pattern, we should see their curses as the “legal language” of the day rather than as personal expressions of hatred or vengeance. It is important to remember that the psalmists were not taking vengeance themselves (even when, as in David’s case, they often had opportunity to do so), but were asking for justice from God in the poetic language that is used in the Psalms.

This last point is particularly important because in the poetic language of the Psalms, more often than not imprecation takes the form of hyperbole and exaggeration for effect. We can prove this by considering the following examples. In Psalm 58:6 we read “Break the teeth in their mouths, O God ... tear out the fangs of those lions!” Clearly, the “lions’ fangs” are poetic, and when we consider the expression “break their teeth in their mouths, O God,” we should realize that is equally poetic, as we read in Psalm 57:4: “I am in the midst of lions; I am forced to dwell among ravenous beasts – men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.” We can see, then, that asking God to break the teeth of the psalmist’s enemies is pure metaphor and meant only in a symbolic rather than literal manner. Such poetic statements in the imprecatory psalms are no different from the psalms that say that smoke issues from God’s nostrils and burning coals from his mouth (Psalm 18:8). To say that this is not literal, but that the imprecatory statements must be taken as being so, is to miss the extent to which the Psalms are, in their very essence, poetry.

When we understand this, we can see why Christians should never pray the imprecatory psalms on their enemies. To do so (as is sadly sometimes the case in areas where Christians undergo severe persecution) is to fail to understand that while these psalms are pleas for justice, their specific language is poetic, not literal, and modern use of that language in a literal sense is flatly unchristian. Some attempt to excuse the practice by saying that Christ himself quoted the imprecatory psalms (for example, verses from Psalm 69 are quoted in Matthew 27:34; John 2:17; John 15:25; etc.). But although Christ did quote things *in* the imprecatory psalms, he never quoted their curses – just as when he pronounced “Woe” to the scribes, Pharisees, and others (Matthew 23:13-33; etc.), he was warning, not cursing, them (see Note 2).



CONCLUSION:

It has been said that the book of Psalms is simple to understand – as long as we understand its difficult parts! – and there is a great deal of truth in that somewhat wry thought. Psalms *is* generally straightforward and simple to understand, but the specific aspects discussed above can make it a difficult book for many. Fortunately, if we keep the principles in mind that we have discussed in this unit we can enjoy and profit from this wonderful book without confusion.

Despite the small areas in which we need to be careful to understand what is being said, the book of Psalms offers endless encouragement, light in times of darkness, inspiring praise, and continual glimpses into hearts that were in tune with the mind of God. Perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, Psalms can repay our efforts to understand its difficulties in order to grasp its blessings.

* Note 1: For example, many of the instances in which the Psalms speak about the law of God clearly associate the law with wisdom, as in “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130) – a thought that sounds remarkably like many statements found in the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 6:23; etc.).

* Note 2: This applies, in exactly the same way, to what the apostle Paul said to the high priest, Ananias, “God will strike you” (Acts 23:3), and when he told Timothy “Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done” (2 Timothy 4:14). In both cases Paul did not curse the individuals or ask God to punish them, but his words were a prediction or the expression of a strong conviction that an individual so evil would not escape the judgment of God.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Looking beneath the surface

1. List some of the ways in which the book of Psalms clearly qualifies as Wisdom Literature, and ways in which the book seems unique.
2. Why is it important to distinguish between physical and spiritual salvation when reading the Psalms?
3. List and memorize the various meanings of the Hebrew title *Elohim*.
4. Which of the possible explanations for the imprecatory psalms seems most likely to you, and why?

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