

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 35

PSALMS – Part Two KEY PSALMS

The last lesson gave the necessary background for understanding general issues with the Psalms. This lesson focuses on certain key psalms for a more full understanding of each. The psalms chosen are those that are more well known or historically important (hence the “Biblical Literacy” aspect of this class!).

I. Psalm 23

The 23rd Psalm is perhaps the best known psalm in the Bible. It is used in funerals as well as times of despair and fear. It is probably the “most memorized” of the Psalms. It is worthy of study and examination in some detail.

The psalm is entitled “A psalm of David.” As mentioned last week, we do not know if this means David wrote the psalm or served as the Psalm’s inspiration. David was certainly a shepherd who would have clearly identified with the psalm’s content.

As we study the Psalm, it is reproduced here so we can visually take it apart and put it back together:

- 1 The LORD [Yahweh] is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
- 3 He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil
For you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me
- 5 You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and
I will dwell in the house of the LORD [Yahweh] forever.

Before looking at a verse by verse understanding of the psalm, let’s take time to notice the poetic structure of the psalm. The psalm has a hinge in verse 4, “Even though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil.” The part of the psalm PRECEEDING that hinge references Yahweh in a third person sense (“Yahweh,” “He,” “He,” “He,” and “He”). After the

hinge, the references to Yahweh are all in second person (“You,” “You,” and “You”). This transition takes the psalm from an outward statement of faith to an inward, personal anchor of faith. It is a faith not just of belief, but a faith that moves and sustains a life.

The parallelism of the poem is best looked at before and after the hinge (For explanations on parallelism, see the last lesson). Before the hinge, the parallelism can be seen as follows:

The LORD is my shepherd	I shall not be in want
He	makes me lie down in green pastures
He	leads me beside quiet waters
He	restores my soul.
He	guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

This first part of the psalm centers on the role of Yahweh as shepherd provider for the psalmist. God is seen as providing for the psalmist’s physical needs (“I shall not be in want” and “makes me lie down in green pastures”) as well as peace of mind (“leads me beside quiet waters” and “restores my soul”).

The psalmist makes clear that the Lord **MAKES** him (us) lie down in green pastures. The Hebrew verb form conveys the idea that God is the force behind lying in the green pastures. I am convinced in my own life, as well as others that I have observed, that left to our own devices, we would most likely not choose to lie in green pastures. Most of us have a propensity to find the thorns and thistles and get knee deep in them! In fact, that is the time when most of us start to look for God to lead us to something better. However, for some reason, we often then leave his guidance and head back to the thorns and thistles that we so ably found on our own.

The Lord also provides for the spiritual needs of the psalmist in “paths of righteousness.” Importantly, this spiritual provision of the Lord is **NOT** based on the sheep’s behavior! God provides the spiritual guidance for the sake of Yahweh’s name. In other words, Yahweh’s character is the basis for this guidance, not the merit or character of the sheep. Truth be told, we all need to acknowledge that God’s provision for us has never been in measure of our worthiness but always out of his abundant mercy and grace. In fact, the ultimate provision for our righteousness came from Christ the good shepherd. He has led us in paths of righteousness through Calvary because of who he is, not what we deserve.

We next hit the hinge of the verse, “Even though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” The Hebrew word “death” is more commonly translated as a dark place. In this context, it would be referencing a deep, dark ravine of which there are many in Palestine. The picture of a shepherd and his sheep traversing through a deep dark ravine would still bring no fear to the sheep. Why? The reason is set out in parallel structure in the rest of the psalm. Here, as noted before, the psalm becomes much more personal in its reference to God in the second person:

You are	with me
Your rod and your staff	they comfort me
You	prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You	anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

God is the reason for no fear. God is the reason for faith. God is the reason for security in the midst of everything we face. God is always with us. Also, God has the ability and the motivation to see to our care. It is God’s job and he is up to the task. God takes personal care of us. God provides for us even in the midst of those people or circumstances that would destroy us. God anoints us claiming us for himself.

This leads the psalmist to his conclusion that:

Surely goodness and love will follow me	all the days of my life
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord	forever.

This is the way with God. Goodness and love most assuredly accompany our good shepherd and are found in his house. It only makes sense that since we are with the shepherd and dwell with him, goodness and love will be with us as well.

If in fact King David wrote this psalm, then it serves us well to remember that the psalm would predate the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. While the Jews often call the temple the house of God, that principal is not referenced here. Consider that livestock often “lived” in the ground floor of the Jew’s homes. The reference, then, in the last verse is that we will stay with our Lord throughout our days. We even go home with him at night.

II. Psalm 137

This Psalm follows the exile of the Judahites to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The psalm reflects the personal anguish and suffering of the psalmist, leaving one to wonder how this could have happened with God. After looking at Psalm 23, one might wonder where the good shepherd was while the events set forth in Psalm 137 occurred. Look at the psalm:

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
- 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps
- 3 For there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
They said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

- 4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.
- 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
If I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

- 7 Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.
"Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"

- 8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us –
- 9 He who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

Looking at this psalm, several things immediately come to mind. First, how sad and depressing to think that one would have to live through the experience of seeing one's infants dashed upon the rocks. Losing a war and going into captivity was far from an easy thing. There was no Geneva Convention to make war "civilized." The loss brought life to an end even if you survived. This sorrow and grief not only prevented the psalmist from singing a happy and joyful song of his homeland to his captors, but it also caused the psalmist to call down similar grief and horrors upon his captors.

Where is the place for this revenge in godly thought? Perhaps here is a great reminder of what the psalms are – a collection of poems put together under the oversight of the Holy Spirit to stir up our hearts and imaginations over the whole spectrum of human experience and emotions to best facilitate our

walk and understanding with God. The Psalms pull no punches. When a psalmist feels abandoned, he says so. When a psalmist feels ignored, he shouts it loudly. When a psalmist questions God, he asks for answers.

Here, when the psalmist suffers grievously, he cries out for revenge. Importantly, the Bible gives us a full picture of matters so we understand that vengeance is not our course. Nor is vengeance the highest feeling of holiness. The Bible does teach us not to lie to our God. Do not hesitate to pour out all your feelings to him. God seeks us to be open and honest with him. His promise to us is to take those feelings and help move us to holiness in spite of them. In this, God is in fact the good shepherd. In this, he finds us where we are and brings us to his home to mend broken hearts and heal wounds.

Many commentators write that this psalm was composed upon the Jews' return from exile. I disagree. This psalm is so raw with emotion that it shouts to me that it was written while in captivity, with the vivid memory fresh in the heart and mind of the psalmist. The psalmist's response to the request for a song of joy out of Jerusalem was an emphatic no. The psalmist hung his harp up, and said if he should ever decide to play such a song for his captor may his right hand lose its ability to play and make his tongue lose its ability to sing.

III. Psalm 119

We will not do a verse by verse analysis of Psalm 119! Instead, we will point out several points useful in our study. First, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. Its 176 verses make it unique among the psalms. Reading it takes a good bit of time and patience, but it rewards the reader with insight into God and life.

Psalm 119 is also of note because it is an acrostic psalm. That term means that the structure follows the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm is divided into 8 verse sections. In each section, each of the verses starts with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. The NIV Study Bible gives each Hebrew letter at the start of each section along with the English name for each Hebrew letter.

A short example of the structure of the psalm can be gleaned by looking at the 8 verses that make up the "B" or "Beth" section of the psalm, verses 9 – 16. In this section, each verse starts with the Hebrew "B" letter (called "Beth").

<p>9 How can a young man keep his way pure?</p> <p>10 I seek you with all my heart;</p> <p>11 I have hidden your word in my heart</p> <p>12 Praise be to you, O LORD;</p> <p>13 With my lips I recount</p> <p>14 I rejoice in following your statutes</p> <p>15 I meditate on your precepts</p> <p>16 I delight in your decrees;</p>	<p>By living according to your word.</p> <p>do not let me stray from your commands.</p> <p>that I might not sin against you.</p> <p>teach me your decrees.</p> <p>all the words that come from your mouth.</p> <p>as one rejoices in great riches.</p> <p>and consider your ways.</p> <p>I will not neglect your word.</p>
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This psalm is a good example of some synonymous parallelism. “To live according to God’s word” is not to “stray from God’s commands” or to “not sin against God.” Similarly, we see relationships between other parts of the psalm. “To keep one’s way pure” is to “seek God with all one’s heart” or to “hide God’s word in one’s heart.” All of these noble expressions reflect a life that has God as its solid foundation. May we all “rejoice in following God’s statutes.” To “meditate on God’s precepts” and “delight in his decrees” should be the hallmark of our lives as we seek his blessings.

Many people wonder how to get their lives to a greater level of purity before God. Surely this psalm unlocks a key. Spend time reading his word. Store it up in our hearts and minds. Dwell on it. Rejoice in it. Praise God for it. The word will not leave us unchanged. Will we conquer sin overnight? Of course not. The promise, however, is sure – as we spend our time before God and his word and as God and his word become more and more our thoughts and goals, we will see greater purity in our lives.

IV. Points for Home

1. Keep Reading!!!
2. Listen
3. Let the Holy One Bring Joy
4. Repent Before God
5. Trust the Shepherd