# The Message of the Psalms

If we want to learn to express ourselves before God in praise and prayer, there is no better plate to look in the Bible than the Psalms. They teach us how to worship not by telling us how, but by showing us how, as the writers express themselves in praise or protest, telling what God has done and proclaiming his greatness.

## Praise

Many psalms rejoice in God’s activity as creator of the whole cosmos (see Psalm 97) the world in which we live (see Ps 104), and our privileged place in God's creation (see Psalm 8). They also rejoice that he is involved In the everyday life and experience of ordinary people (see Psalm 103), for God's activity does not just belong to great events of the past, such as the exodus, or to great events of the future, when his purpose for the world will finally be achieved. God is the God of the present.

In the present God is the creator, still breathing his cre­ative breath into the world, watering it each day with his rain. He is Lord of everyday life. The Psalms describe cre­ation in a variety of ways: one common theme is that at cre­ation God overcame all the powers of chaos that sought to resist his will, so that disorder now has clear limits set to it. This constitutes a promise that the disorder and evil which can threaten to overwhelm our lives (and the life of the whole world) will not be able to do so.

The Psalms proclaim that the God of Israel is God of the whole world. It belongs to him, he rules it, he cares about it, and the whole world is challenged to worship him. When the Psalms say that God is Lord of the world, they seem to be making claims that are not true in the world as we see it. But these are claims about a lordship of God which we believe will one day be a reality, even if it is not so now.

The God whom the people of Israel worshipped was both the creator of the world and the one who had especially committed himself to them. Their response is both deep, enthusiastic joy, and awed hu­mility. The Psalms consistent­ly illustrate these two sides to praise. Some praise is noisy and enthusiastic; it is also clear that praise involves us bowing ourselves down in awed silence (see Psalm 95).

## Protest

The people of God often find that there seems to be a gap between the faithful­ness and power which our praise acknowledges and the calamities that actually happen to us. Of course, suffering and defeat are sometimes our fault (see Psalm 130). But this is not always so. One of the most striking features of the Psalms is the way they express the sense of pain and let-down felt in suffering - by the individual (see, for example, Psalm 22) or the community (see Psalms 89 and 137).

Israel's understanding of life and death is expressed particularly clearly in psalms such as these. To 'live' is not merely a matter of whether you are breathing or not: in its fullest sense 'life' involves good health, freedom, happiness, fellowship, success, and a sense of the presence of God. Death, too, is not merely what happens when you finally breathe your last, but when­ever people no longer experience fullness of life. It is as If death has wormed its way into their life ahead of its time. When the Psalmists pray to be delivered from the realm of death (and later praise God for so delivering them), they do not mean that they need to be brought back from the dead, In our sense, but that they need to be healed or released and to know God's presence and ac­tivity in their lives once more, to have life in the full sense restored to them.

The Psalms rarely talk about a fuller experience of life after death (but see Psalm 73). They wrestle much with the problem of the suffering of the just and the prosperity of the unjust, and it is in this life that they expect to see justice done and oppression punished.

## Telling what God has done

Our experience of God does not stop when things fall apart. The 'protest' psalms plead with God to turn to us and be the God whom we lifted up in our praise. The psalms show us a God who acts in re­sponse to protest and prayer (see Psalms 18; 30; 118), who has both power and a constant love. He is able and willing to keep the commitments he makes.

In telling what God has done in the Psalms, people's experience of God is expressed in vivid pictures taken from everyday life. In a dry land such as Israel, the experience of thirst may become not merely something unpleasant but a matter of life and death. So longing for God is de­scribed as thirst, and God's coming to us is described in terms of thirst being quenched, or of the 'thirst' of the land being quenched by rain. But when rain comes, it can bring floods which threat­en to sweep people away. In the Psalms we see danger de­scribed in terms of flood, and God as the rock on which a person can climb to safety.

Praising God in the Psalms is a corporate affair. Whether it is praise, protest, thanksgiv­ing or proclamation, it hap­pens together. For the people of Israel the natural place for worship is the temple in Jeru­salem, for the God of Israel had promised his people that he would always be available there to meet them. It was therefore a place of precious-ness and joy. To be unable to go to the temple was a devas­tating deprivation. It was not that people believed God was confined to the temple: they knew that he was the God of the whole world and could be active everywhere. But they also knew that he had prom­ised he would always meet them there, where offerings were made and where his Law was deposited.

## Proclaiming God's great­ness

Praise, protest and telling what God has done all ad­dress God. But the Psalms also speak out in the name of God to humanity. They remind people of what God has done for them and of what he ex­pects of them. They promise his blessing and warn of his judgment. They declare that God's purpose will be fulfilled and that his justice will be brought about (see, for exam­ple, Psalms 2 and 82).

In that process, the king of Israel has a key place. In the Psalms, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, the 'anointed one' (the 'messiah') is not ori­ginally a figure expected in the future. He is the actual king of Israel, chosen by God, promised his support, and called to commit himself to God's concern for justice. The king is very prominent, not just in the psalms of proclama­tion, but also in the psalms of protest (which often speak of his defeats and needs) and the psalms of testimony (in which he speaks of the way God has answered his prayers). In fact, the kings of Israel were not very good at reflecting God's concerns in their leadership of the people. From 587BC on­wards there were no longer kings ruling in Jerusalem. So it is that the 'anointed one', spoken of in the Psalms and in other places in the Old Testa­ment, became an object of hope. In the coming of Jesus Christ we see those hopes be­ginning to be realized.

Promise and protest, telling what God has done and pro­claiming his greatness, all find their place in Israel's hymn-book. The Psalms are de­signed for churches and indi­vidual believers to model their worship and prayer on. The book begins, in Psalm 1, with a promise of blessing for those who make these writings the object of their delight and meditation.

## Who Rules in the World? Psalm 2

Who rules in the world? God and his servants, or the nations and their rulers?

Zion (another name for Jeru­salem) was the place where God promised to make himself known in the midst of Israel. It was there that he installed Da­vid and his successors as Is­rael's anointed kings. His rela­tionship with them is portrayed as that of a father with his firstborn son (verses 2, 6-7). God also planned to reveal him­self to the world from the same place and his commitment to David and his successors in­cluded bringing about his 'rule' through his 'son' in Jerusalem. As we see from the opening verses of the psalm, more often than not the nations resisted this dual lordship. But God reaffirms that he will triumph, by force if not by persuasion (verses 8-11).

Some time after this psalm was written, Jerusalem came under the power of foreign overlords. Nothing further from the picture in Psalm 2 could be imagined. So the psalm then started to express Israel's hopes for the day when God would make it reality, when an 'anointed one' would again rule on God's behalf (the Hebrew word messiah is sim­ply the word which means 'an­ointed'). And so the first Chris­tians proclaimed that these hopes were fulfilled in Jesus. His resurrection and ascension are the guarantee that the pro­mise of Psalm 2 will be fulfilled.

It is important for us to lis­ten for God's laughter (verse 4) and not to be too impressed by the pretensions of world pow­ers which think they can shape their own destiny and that of the world independently of God.

## In All the Earth: Psalm 8

What is our relationship with the physical world? Sometimes we seem to be the pillagers and destroyers of the ecosystem, lording ourselves over it as if we can do what we like with it. But at other times we find our­selves the victims of earth­quakes, floods, volcanoes, and famine. Then it seems that we have no control over the phys­ical world at all - it does what it likes with us.

Psalm 8 puts these thoughts into perspective. Here we have God's view of humanity's rela­tionship with him and with his world. We see that:

• The purpose of both heav­en and earth is to 'magnify' God, not to meet our needs (verses 1-2).

• We human beings are a central concern of the creator God himself (verses 3-4). We are in a real sense God-like, in the position of authority we are given over creation (verses 5-9). Yet this authority is given, and we are responsible to God for the way we use it.

Sometimes experience may make us wonder how we can see God as attentively caring in the way verse 4 says he is. Of­ten we will be aware that cre­ation is far from being under our control, as verses 5-8 say it is. But in the New Testa­ment we are invited to recall that the man Jesus has been crowned with glory and honor because of his suffering; and that is the guarantee that all things will come under his con­trol (see Hebrews 2:5-9).

## Why Have You Aban­doned Me? Psalm 22

Pain and grief need to be ex­pressed; we pay a price even­tually for repressing them. A 'protest' like Psalm 22 gives us a way of expressing our sense of hurt, abandonment, rejec­tion, and of being attacked. Yet it is more than merely a means of getting things off pur chest; it is a way of expressing our feelings before God, even if we see him as the one who has hurt and abandoned us.

The opening verse sums up the protest. I am sure that God has abandoned me: but I ex­press it to him (which presup­poses that really he cannot have abandoned me!). There is irony here, and tension as the psalm alternates between pro­test and praise. (Contrast verses 1-2,6-8 and 12-21, with verses 3-5,9-11 and 22-31.) The Psalmist invites us to hold on to two seemingly opposed sets of facts: the great truths about who God has always been, still is, and will be; and the reality of my present exper­ience of forsakenness. It is easier in such a situation to deny one set of truths or the other.

But both the protest and the praise appear on the lips of Je­sus (see Mark 15:34; Hebrews 2:12). This psalm reflects the depths of human suffering and the heights of human joy. It is at home on his Good Friday and Easter Day, and on ours.

## Why Me? Psalm 73

'Why?' People lose their jobs or have their houses burgled, and they wonder why such things happen to them, espe­cially when it seems that peo­ple who are less honest or less upright get away with any­thing. When we ask God 'why?' often we do not find we receive the answers we want. The question may still rein mystery. But God does offer us ways of living with the question 'why?'.

Psalm 73 affirms that we bring our whys to God, but notes that our complaints t to be mixed up with sin (verses 2-3) and that we may need have our complaints turned back on us (verse 15). It af­firms that when we bring our whys to God, we may need see what we are protesting against as part of a larger picture (verses 16-17). God invites us to see our world in the context of God's world, and this world in the context of the next (see verses 21-24,26).

While it affirms that we can bring our whys to God, it shows us that we may then find that they cease to be so very important. The psalm begins from what other people have and what we wish we had (verses 3-14). It finishes satisfied with having God (verses 25-26,28). The New Testament equivalent to those statements is Paul's 'for me to live is Christ' (Philippians,l:21). For the Psalmist and for Paul, it is having everything else taken away that tests the genuine­ness of our satisfaction with God.

## How Long? Psalm 82

All over the world, believers and unbelievers alike witness the oppression of the needy by the powerful and ask, 'How long is it to be like this?' Here God asks the same question, but without the despair that of­ten characterizes our asking. He is the authority to whom all other lesser authorities are responsible.

Like us, the people of Israel understood heaven by finding parallels with their experience of life on earth. So God gathers, in the manner of an earthly court, with his super­natural subordinates who seem to be the counterparts of rulers on earth. He alone possesses life and power in himself: they possess life only by his grace (verses 6-7). The difference between them and him was so great that Israel hardly ever used the term 'god' to describe them. Only Yahweh was really 'God'. But here they receive the courtesy title which under­lines the contrast between them and the one real God;

They are challenged to be­have as the true ministers of a God like him, whose character is to be concerned for those who have no one else to look after their needs. The psalm presupposes that they will ig­nore this challenge. God prom­ises that they will therefore be judged.

Only the last verse of this psalm is actually a prayer. It is a very powerful prayer, simply a challenge to God to do what he has said he will do. It speaks of judgment in a more positive sense. The judging of the world to which it looks for­ward will be good news for the world. It will mean the imple­menting of God's just and gentle government in a world cur­rently oppressed by evil powers, earthly and supernatural.

## God's Faithfulness to Israel: Psalm 89

We tend to think that the events of history are caused by human decisions (or mere chance). National triumph or decline is explained in terms of politics or economics or soci­ology. But the Old Testament more often sees God behind na­tional triumph or defeat (no doubt working through political, economic and social fac­tors). It is such an experience that Psalm 89 starts from, though it is a long time before this emerges.

The psalm begins in praise to God for his love and faithful­ness throughout Israel's his­tory, both in creation, and in the experience of those who pray this psalm (verses 1-18). When prayer begins in the con­text of such praise, there is then something to build on. In verses 19 to 37, the praise focuses specifically on God's commitment to David. Prayer also belongs in the context of God's promises; it includes re­minding God of what he has promised.

But then the real theme of the psalm is expressed. It is a complaint at the astonishing gap between the theory of verses 1 to 37 and what has actually been happening (verses 38-51). As verses 1 to 37 reach the heights in proclaiming who God is and what he has prom­ised, verses 38 to 51 plumb the depths in attributing just as di­rectly to God this recent calam­ity. He has all the focus in verses 1 to 37, and he is still the focus as they look at their affliction. It is the fact that he has let them down that hurts most of all. As is common with the Psalms, we cannot identify the particular events that Psalm 89 originally referred to, but that is not the point. It was the kind of prayer that could be prayed in the context of any national disaster.

In a psalm of protest, the ac­tual plea (verses 46-51) - the part corresponding to what we would call prayer - is short and to the point. God is simply asked to remember and to turn his face to his people again. Exactly what he does is left to him.

## The Shadow of the Almighty: Psalm 91

On the day I write, the newspa­per reports the suicide of a much-loved television personal­ity, whose voice 'always con­veyed steady reassurance and comfort... If he died desperate, then we are standing on sand, and I wish he hadn't told us.' Psalm 91 shows us where our true security lies. Here, as elsewhere in the Psalms, the Psalmist expresses his praise of God and his trust in him by ad­dressing people (with God no doubt assumed to be overhear­ing) rather than God (with other people overhearing). Here a general statement (verse 1), a personal confession (verse 2), a direct promise (verses 3-13), and actual words from God (verses 14-16) combine with one purpose - to declare the se­curity of those who make God their refuge. It is a psalm of trust, not directly telling God that we trust him, but telling others that he is trustworthv.

The variety of terms for God is worth noting: ‘the Most High’ and ‘the Almighty’ suggest his power; ‘the Lord’ (actually 'Yahweh', the name spe­cially revealed to his people) and 'my God' suggest his per­sonal care. 'Shelter', 'shadow', 'refuge', 'fortress' and similar words express in concrete im­ages what these two aspects of God can mean to us.

But is the psalm true? Often those who trust God seem to experience illness and calamity as much as anyone. A good ex­ample was the murder of five missionaries in Ecuador in the 1950s. Yet the widow of one, Elizabeth Elliot, entitled her husband's biography Shadow of the Almighty. It might have seemed that if anyone's life dis­proved Psalm 91 it was Jim El­liot's, yet his widow affirmed that somehow it was still true. He pulls me away from an indi­vidualistic, 'private' faith into one which shares his concern. God works for righteousness and justice on behalf of the op­pressed. And he invites me into an even more searching confes­sion: that he rules not merely in personal life, but in world history and through the hea­vens/verses 9-12). So wor­ship invites me into an awe be­fore God's holiness and a surrender to his love; or an awe before his love and a sur­render to his holiness.

I end where I began (verse 2). But it is not really the same place, because of the journey I have travelled.

## The Love of God: Psalm 103

What draws me into worship? Here it is an awareness of the good things God has given me (verses 1-2). First, forgiveness (verses 3, 8-12): God sees the sins which appall us and which we hope we hide from others, and takes the risk of keeping on forgiving. He overflows with mercy - he cannot keep it in. He removes our sins as far away as infinity rather than let them come between us and him.

He is the source of all heal­ing, sustaining, renewal and love that I experience (verses 3-5,13-18). He knows our frailty and weeps with those who weep or grieve or fear. He is the guarantee that, if we do not experience all this in ful­lness now, we will in time.

But God is not just that for us individually (verses 6-7). When I am forgiven and healed and sustained, I share in the experience of God's people through the ages, and I belong with them. And the God of for­giveness and healing is also the God of liberation and justice: he will not let me be satisfied with forgiveness and healing.

## God the Great Creator: Psalm 104

It is difficult to take creation for granted. Gazing at the stars on a clear night, or surveying the horizon from a ridge of hills, or seeing the ocean pound against cliffs, or examin­ing minute life-forms through a microscope, or watching exotic creatures on a wildlife program, all make us wonder at the world in which we live.

There is a dark side to creation which also makes it impossible to take creation for granted: the sea pounding a lifeboat to pieces, the earth quaking and destroying a town, a virus bringing affliction to young and old, and the fact of death which brings an end to the life of every living creature.

Psalm 104 sets both aspects of creation into perspective by seeing them in the context of God as creator. If creation is so wonderful, then how wonderful is the God of creation, who not only gave it life at the begin­ning, but continues to sustain it as gardener, feeder and waterer, keeper and herdsman. He is Lord of light, clouds and wind, and the gentle provider for bubbling stream and grow­ing grass. He not only fulfils all that people need, but also cares for creatures who are useless to humanity but remarkable in their own right.

He watches over creation's dark side too: seeing at the be­ginning that the deep did not overwhelm the world; creating darkness with its dangers as well as daylight; turning Levia­than (seen in the ancient world as a fearful embodiment of the powers of evil and disorder threatening to overwhelm the world) into a toy monster; exer­cising his power to take back the life that only he can give; sometimes making the earth shake again to remind us that its stability is his gift.

Creation cannot be taken for granted. Still less can the God of creation.

## His Love Endures for Ever: Psalm 118

People do not always exper­ience God's protection from pain and defeat. Here, however, is a testimony from someone who has known that protection.

Despite the absence of directions, it is not too difficult to work out how different people are taking part in Psalm 118. The central figure is the king, testifying to the Lord's deliver­ance in battle (verses 5-7, 10-14, 17-19, 21-22, 28). The priests bless him as he returns to God's house to give thanks (verses 20, 26-27). Perhaps the challenge in verses 1 to 4 and 29 comes from them, too. The people join in his praise and share in his confession of trust in God (verses 8-9,15-16,23-25).

The psalm shows us the way in which the people of Israel, or its king, or an ordinary per­son who has been ill or under pressure, comes back to give God the praise when he has an­swered their prayer. The exper­ience of defeat or illness raises the question whether God's love really is as constant as we say in our praises. When God answers our prayer (often when we thought he had stopped lis­tening), we are convinced once more of God's faithfulness, and can use this conviction the next time some negative exper­ience threatens to bring us down. A psalm of thanksgiving or testimony such as this gives public expression to what God has done. So it builds up the faith not only of the one who has experienced the answer to prayer, but also of all those who hear what God has done.

## The Word of God: Psalm 119

Is God someone who delights in giving people orders, or a li­beral parent who just likes do­ing nice things for people?

In Psalm 119 we are being told how to live God's way. 'Laws', 'statutes', 'commands', 'decrees', are among the fa­vorite words of the psalm, yet the commitment expressed in it is based on love (verses 47-48). We take God's word seriously because we believe it truly re­flects who he is and how the world is. Not only that, but by serving God and following his ways we find freedom (verse 45).

Following God involves be­ing willing to look at the areas of life where his expectations of us might be different from the world's. The world may put us under physical or moral or social pressure to change our position, and in this situation God's word as promise also comes to be of key importance (for example, verses 41-42,49-50,147-48). We are called to pray under pressure, as the psalms often do, pleading 're­new my life!' (verse 25). The pressure is both external and internal, in the question whether God's promise is true. (In verses 71 and 75, for in­stance, who is the Psalmist try­ing to convince?)

Those who do what God commands have a right to claim God's promises; and those who experience the fulfil­lment of the promises will be people who go on to fulfill the commands (for example, verse 146). God is both the blessing God and the commanding God. He draws me to an obedience which is awed but joyful (verse 7) and to a trust which is joy­ful but awed (verse 38).

## By the Waters of Babylon: I'salm 137

For many people, one of the most troubling features of the Bible is the apparent vindictiveness of many of the Psalms. We can accept other aspects of the way the Psalms speak to God: praise, thanksgiving, prayer, even perplexity. But what of the kind of devastating request that verses 7 to 9 make here?

What made people pray like that? They were not simply insensitive and unspiritual: the moving and poignant lament of verses 1-6 makes that clear. And they were not wrong in believing that God judged oppressors: both Old Testament and New Testament affirm that. They were not unaware that God cared about other nations: many psalms make that clear. Neither (to judge from the New Testament) were they wrong to pray for their oppressors' punishment: we find that in Revelation 6.

Both Revelation 6 and this psalm are prayers of people who have been deeply afflicted by other human beings. We should hardly allow ourselves to feel too superior as we consider their prayer if we have not had to cope with their kind of suffering. Apparently God was accepting enough of their prayer to allow it to find a place in his book. We are allowed to express the most unacceptable feelings to God.

But will God answer the prayer? How does it relate to Jesus’ ‘Father, forgive them?’ Actually, prayer for forgiveness cannot be prayed except in the light of the cross. Without the death of Jesus, there is no for­giveness. There is only judg­ment. Even after what hap­pened when Jesus died on the cross, people can still choose to experience either God's for­giveness or his judgment. (Je­sus himself echoes Psalm 137:9 in Luke 19:44.) The cross makes forgiveness avail­able; but it is people's response to it that determines whether the exiles' prayer is answered, or whether Jesus' prayer is an­swered instead.

## God is Everywhere: Psalm 139

In this psalm we sense an ex­traordinary contrast between the deep devotion to God in verses 1 to 18 and 23 to 24, and the deep hatred of verses 19 to 22. This is why verses 1 to 18 often get used on their own. But it is all one psalm: so how is it possible to move from such devotion to such hatred? The Old Testament prophets rebuked the people of Israel be­cause their devotion was not accompanied by a hatred of evil. Real devotion to God will express itself in a loathing of wickedness. In fact, the psalm does not seem to have specific wicked people in mind; it is talking of wicked people in general. And it is not talking about our personal enemies but about God’s. We are not expecting God to treat our enemies as his, but accepting that God expects us to treat his enemies as ours. Believers prove their sincerity by such hatred of evil.

Indeed, in the context of verses 19 to 24, the earlier part of the psalm appears in a new light. The wicked are those who think they can get away with anything; however, saying the psalm involves being watched closely by God, to es­tablish that we really do reject the wicked and all their ways (verses 23-24). Verses 1 to 18 show us what such openness to God means.

The fact that God knows all about us (verses 1-6), can reach us anywhere (verses 7-12), and has always been in­volved even in the innermost aspects of our lives (verses 13-18), is presented as straightfor­ward fact. Our Bible transla­tions have difficulty in keeping it that way, and present some verses as reassuring, others as worrying. The psalm itself im­plies throughout that it is both a wonderful and a solemn thing: we cannot get away from God. But because he is who he is, what could be a suf­focating stranglehold is actual­ly something extremely liberat­ing - if we are committed to what is right and just, and re­main stoutly hostile to evil.