



Psalms

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-02:08

The book of Psalms. It's a collection of 150 ancient Hebrew poems, songs, and prayers that come from all different periods in Israel's history. Many of these poems are connected with King David—73 actually. And he was known as a poet and a harp player. But there are many different authors behind these poems. There's the poems of Asaph, or from the sons of Korah, and some from other worship leaders in the temple. Even Solomon and Moses have their own poems, and nearly one third of these are anonymous.

Now, many of these poems came to be used by the choirs that sang in Israel's temple, but the book of Psalms is actually not a hymn book. At some point in the period after Israel's exile to Babylon, these ancient poems were gathered together and intentionally arranged into the book of Psalms before us. And it has a very unique design and message that you're not going to notice unless you read it from beginning to end.

Now, to see how the book of Psalms is designed, it's actually most helpful to start at the end. The book concludes with five poems of praise to the God of Israel, and each one begins and ends with the word "hallelujah," which is Hebrew for a command to tell a group of people to praise "Yah," which is short for the divine name Yahweh. Now, that's a really nice five-part arrangement, and it looks like someone's giving us a conclusion here to the book.

So it invites the question: Does the book have any other signs of intentional design? If you pay attention to the headings of the poems, you'll notice that at five places, your Bible translators have the headings, "Book One," "Book Two," "Book Three," "Four," and "Five" at various points and that these divide the book into five large sections.

Now, the reason for this is that the final poem in each of those sections has a very similar ending that looks like an editorial addition. It reads something like, “May the Lord, the God of Israel, be blessed forever and ever, amen and amen.” So the book has a conclusion. It has an internal organization into five main parts. And so the natural place to go from here is now the beginning to look for an introduction.

Chapters 1-2

02:09-03:37

And what do we find? Psalms 1 and 2, which stand outside of Book One because most of the poems in Book One are linked to David, except Psalms 1 and 2, which are anonymous. Psalm 1 celebrates how blessed the person is who meditates on the Torah, prayerfully reading it day and night and then obeying it.

Now the word *torah*, it simply means “teaching,” and more specifically it came to refer to the five books of Moses that begin the Old Testament. And here actually, the word seems to be used with both meanings in mind, which explains why it has five main parts. The book of Psalms is being offered as a new Torah that will teach God’s people the lifelong practice of prayer as they strive to obey God’s commands given in the first Torah.

Psalm 2 is a poetic reflection on God’s promise to King David from 2 Samuel chapter 7, that one day a messianic king would come and establish God’s Kingdom over the world and defeat evil and rebellion among the nations. Now, Psalm 2 concludes by saying that all those who take refuge in the messianic king will be “blessed,” precisely the word used to open Psalm 1.

And so together, these two poems tell us that the book of Psalms is designed to be the prayer book of God’s people as they strive to be faithful to the commands of the Torah as they hope and wait for the future messianic kingdom. Now, with these two themes introduced, we can start to see how the smaller books have been designed as well around these two ideas.

Chapters 3-41

03:38-04:23

So for example, Book One has, right at the center, a collection of poems, Psalms 15-24, that opens and closes with a call to covenant faithfulness. And then in Psalms 16-18, we find a depiction of David as a model of this kind of faithfulness. So he calls out to God to deliver him, and God elevates him as king.

Now, in the corresponding set of poems, Psalms 20-23, the David of the past has become an image of the messianic king of the future, who will also call out to God. He will be delivered and then given a kingdom over the nations.

And then right at the center of this collection is a poem, Psalm 19, dedicated to praising God for the Torah. So here we go, the two themes from Psalms 1 and 2 are bound together tightly here.

Chapters 42-72

04:24-04:56

Book Two opens with two poems that are united in their hope for a future return to the temple in Zion, and this is the image closely associated with the hope of the messianic kingdom. Then, Book Two closes with a poem that depicts the future reign of the messianic king over all of the nations. This poem's really amazing because it echoes all these other passages from the prophets about the messianic kingdom, and it concludes by saying that this king's reign will bring about the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham to bring God's blessing to all of the nations.

Chapters 73-89

04:56-05:19

Book Three also concludes with a poem reflecting on God's promise to David, but this time in light of Israel's exile. So the poet remembers how God said he would never abandon the line of David, but now he's looking at Israel's rebellion and its result and destruction and exile, and the downfall of the line of David. And so the poet ends by asking God to never forget his promise to David.

Chapters 90-106

05:19-05:52

Book Four is designed to respond to this crisis of exile, so the opening poem returns us back to Israel's roots with a prayer of Moses. And he does what he did on Mount Sinai after the golden calf incident, which is to call upon God to show mercy.

The center of Book Four is dominated by a group of poems that announce that the Lord, the God of Israel, reigns as the true King of the world and that all creation—trees, mountains, rivers—are all summoned to celebrate that future day when God will bring his justice and Kingdom over all the world.

Chapters 107-145

05:52-06:45

Book Five opens with a series of poems that affirm that God hears the cries of his people and will one day send the future king to defeat evil and bring God's Kingdom.

This book also contains two larger collections, one called the "Hallel" and the other called the "Songs of Ascent." Each one of these collections concludes with a poem about the future messianic kingdom. And these two collections together, they sustain the hope for a future exodus-like act of God to redeem his people.

And then, right between them is Psalm 119. It's the longest poem in the book. It's an alphabet poem. Each line begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and it explores the wonder and the gift of the Torah as God's Word to his people.

So here we go. The themes from Psalms 1 and 2, Torah and messiah, combined all together here in Book Five. Which brings us all the way back to that five-poem conclusion.

Chapters 146-150

06:45-08:37

In the center poem, Psalm 148, all creation is summoned to praise the God of Israel because he has "raised up a horn for his people." Now the horn here, it's a metaphor of a bull's horn raised in victory. And this image echoes back to the same image used in Hannah's song, 1 Samuel chapter 2, but also to the earlier Psalm 132. The horn is a symbol for the future messianic king and his victory over evil. It's a fitting conclusion to this amazing book.

Now, here's one more thing that you are likely going to miss if you don't read this book in order. There's lots of different kinds of poems in the book of Psalms, but they all basically fall into two big categories: either poems of lament or poems of praise.

Poems of lament express pain, confusion, and anger about how horrible the world is and how horrible the things are happening to the poet. And so these poems draw attention to what's wrong in the world, and they ask God to do something about it. There's a lot of these in the book, which tells us something important, that lament is an appropriate response to the evil that we see in our world. But what you'll notice is that lament poems predominate earlier in the book, in Books One through Three.

But pay attention because you'll see praise poems occasionally too. Praise poems are poems of joy and celebration, and they draw attention to what's good in the world. And they retell stories of what God has done in our lives and thank God for it.

In Books Four and Five, you'll notice that praise poems come to outnumber lament poems, and it all culminates in that five-part hallelujah conclusion.

So this shift from lament to praise, this is profound, and it tells us something about the nature of prayer. As we hope for the messianic kingdom, as the book teaches us to do, this will create tension for us as we look out on the tragic state of our world and of our lives.

Conclusion

08:37-08:59

And so the psalms teach us not to ignore the pain of our lives, but at the same time, biblical faith is forward-looking, looking to the promise of God's future messianic kingdom. And so Torah and messiah, lament and praise, faith and hope. That's what the book of Psalms is all about.