

God's Message to Us in the Psalms

Halifax, NS

1 July 2018, 2:00 PM

Introduction

Today, in our sermon series on God's Message to Us in Every Book of the Bible, we have come to a very unique book indeed: the Psalms.

- Unlike any other book in the Bible, the Psalms are a collection of songs that the Holy Spirit of God has compiled for us.
- Each Psalm is an individual composition.
 - Most of them were written by David, the King of Israel,
 - however, there are quite a few written by others...
 - At least one is from Moses (Psalm 90—and some say Psalm 91 also),
 - And there are quite a few that were written after David—some even after the exile when the people came back in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

It was probably Ezra the priest who compiled the Psalter.

- Whether he did or not, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit led the compiler in a number of ways...
 1. First, the Holy Spirit guided him in selecting which Psalms would be included in the Psalter.
 - This was not a decision left to man, but to God the Spirit.
 - We can be sure that we have the psalms God wants us to have—none were excluded and none were included apart from God's will.
 - One of the reasons we sing only the songs in the Psalter is because these are the ones the Lord collected for us...
 - According to historians like Philip Schaff and Kenneth Scott Lattourette, the Psalms were virtually the only songs that were sung in the early church and remained so for some time—the only exception being a couple of the New Testament canticles that were sometimes sung.
 2. Second, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit also guided the hands of Ezra or whoever did it, to put them in the order we find them.
 - There are five books that make up the Psalms, and each ends with a benediction.
 - Reading through the Psalter in a couple of days gave me a real sense of the order of the books—more about that later.
 3. Third, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit guided Ezra in inserting the benedictions at the end of each of the five books into which the Psalms are divided...
 - These benedictions, though added, are part of the word of God.

So what we have in the Psalms is a collection of individual songs compiled in a Holy-Spirit-inspired order for us to read and to sing.

- The Psalms have been very widely used in almost every age of the church, although, sadly, not nearly as much in our own.

- William Vengemeren comments: “The Psalms have a distinct place in Christian liturgy. A.F. Kirkpatrick commented: ‘From the earliest times the Psalter has been the church’s manual of prayer and praise in public worship.’ J.J. Stewart Perowne wrote, ‘No single book of Scripture, not even the New Testament, has, perhaps, ever taken such hold on the heart of Christendom.’ [and then Vengemeren adds:] The above sentiments reflect nineteenth century practice. Since that time, much has changed. The Psalms are sung and read less. Hymns, gospel songs, and other readings have taken their place in public and private worship.

We are very blessed to have this wonderful collection of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in our Bibles.

- Now let’s look at what God has given us in this wonderful collection.

I. What we have in the Psalms are the out-breathings of the soul of the righteous.

A. Contained in them are the divinely approved thoughts, longings, prayers, concerns, hopes, assurances, agonies, lamentations, sentiments, praises, and confessions that a believer ought to have.

1. These songs were given by the Holy Spirit, not merely to be a record of what someone was thinking,
 - but an expression of what a godly person ought to be thinking.
 - They give us words to bring before God.
2. There are two ways that we can know that this is so.
 - a. First, because these are the songs God has given His church to sing in public worship.
 - The Lord would not give us songs that are polluted with pride and selfishness or with unworthy thoughts about God...
 - He would not call us to lift such songs before Him in the assembly!
 - b. Second, you can be sure that they are pure because Jesus sang them when He came into this world.
 - He would not have been able to do this if they contain sinful expressions of the soul to God.
 - We know that He did sing them, not only from the fact it would have been His duty to do so, but also because He tells us that He did.
 - In Hebrews 2:12, the words of Psalm 22 are said to be His words speaking of His brothers when He says, **“I will declare Your name to My brethren; and in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to you.”**

TRANS> So Jesus sings with us—

B. It is important to understand that Jesus sings with us.

1. Hebrews 8:2 describes Him as our worship leader.
 - He is there called a minister of the sanctuary.
 - The word minister is actually liturgist here—one who leads worship.
 - We believe that Jesus continues to sing with us, not as physically present, but spiritually.
2. That means that the Psalms are the out-breathings of His soul.

- Our goal should be to join our affections and sentiments and prayers and praises with Him as the Son of God incarnate, the Son of Man.
 - As our righteous king, He leads us in lifting up what is pleasing to God in our songs.
- 3. And not only that, but in singing these songs consciously with Him, we are led to look at them from His perspective.
 - We learn what is in His heart—we learn of His longings for the kingdom and for its establishment.
 - We think of His zeal as the King who will overthrow our enemies and establish us before God.
 - Singing with Him draws us into fellowship with Him as our gracious Lord.
 - Someone might ask—but how can Jesus sing the psalms where sin is confessed since He Himself never sinned?
 - The answer is easy—as our king, Jesus confesses our sins as His own—as the sins that He took responsibility for when He went to the cross.
 - In the same way, we ask God to bless us on account of our righteousness... not that we have as individuals, but the righteousness we have through faith in Jesus.

TRANS> So you see that there is nothing unworthy in the Psalms, but instead all that is there is quite pleasing and proper for a soul to express to the Lord.

- C. Having such a collection is of inestimable value for helping us to know how we ought to respond to God in the issues of life and in our praises.
1. Our goal should be to shape the out-breathings of our souls in accordance with the Psalter.
 - Our praises and our prayers should more and more be conformed to the Psalms.
 2. Some of the sentiments and prayers and praises in the Psalms are much more difficult for us to bring our hearts to express than others.
 - There are things that are not right in our souls that need to be corrected.
 - For example, those who lived in the ancient world sometimes looked at forgiveness as weakness—but the Psalms teach them to praise God for forgiving us.
 - In our day, we are squeamish about asking God to destroy the wicked, but the Psalms force us not only to ask God for this, but also to praise Him for doing it.
 - And then we face the challenge of bringing our heart up the heights of these praises...
 - We sing of the greatness or the goodness of God with our lips, but we know that our hearts need to be raised to the fullness of these praises.
 3. And let me add that I can find no warrant for the modern practice of adding to the inspired collection of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that the Holy Spirit has given us in our Bible.
 - If this was the will of God, why is it that there was not a great explosion of new songs in the first three centuries?

- We have no records of such songs, and surely we would if they had been written...
 - Instead we in the writings of our fathers that they sang the Psalms almost exclusively—with the occasional singing of the prophecies of Zacharias and Mary in Luke’s gospel.
- If God had meant us to add new songs when Jesus came—if such songs were needed to complete our worship—surely the apostles would have provided them.
 - If had been God’s intention for us to include songs of our own making, surely the apostles would have encouraged this and such would have been produced in the first three centuries... but it is not so.
- Our fathers in the church understood that the Psalms, the songs that God gave to Israel, were full of Christ.
 - They enjoyed the richness of singing the word of God rather than the fallible words of men.
 - We need songs that are balanced and shaped by the divine Spirit rather than by human sentiments.

TRANS> Now let’s consider the content of the Psalter.

- It seems that the first two Psalms serve as a prologue to the rest of the book.
- In Psalms 1 and 2, we have the foundation of all that is to follow.
 - What do they contain?

II. The first Psalm sets up the contrast between the righteous and the wicked that dominates the whole Psalter.

- Turn to it and let’s take a look. Listen as I read it to you:
- **Psalm 1:1-6: Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper. ⁴ The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind drives away. ⁵ Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.”**

A. You can see the sharp divide between the righteous and the ungodly...

1. The righteous man is said to be blessed and the ungodly cursed...
 - The righteous is like a tree planted by the water (it didn’t just grow on its own, it was deliberately planted).
 - It bears much fruit...
 - The ungodly is like chaff—chaff is the stuff in the wheat that the farmers in Israel separated from the grain by using oxen to trample the grain on a threshing floor and then by tossing the trampled plant remains into the wind so that the lighter chaff was blown away and the heavier grain was left.
 - Think how entirely different chaff is from a tree.

- Further to this, Psalm 1 tells us what becomes of the godly and of the wicked at the end.
 - The righteous one ends up being received by God—known by Him at the judgment day—while the ungodly does not stand, but perishes in that day.
- 2. The righteous man is also distinguished from the wicked by what he does.
 - The ungodly have their own counsel and pathway, but the godly does not walk in that counsel...
 - The defining characteristic of the godly is that he meditates on God’s law day and night—he delights in God’s word.
 - In other words, he believes what God says, he shapes his life to conform to what God says.
 - He lives by the promises of God and obeys the commandments of God.
 - When God tells him he is a sinner, he believes that.
 - When God tells him that He will pardon his sins through the blood of the covenant, he believes that and rejoices.
 - When God tells him that He will be his God and make him to be one of His people, the righteous man also believes that.
 - His whole business is to live in conformity to God’s holy Word, while the business of the ungodly is to live in conformity to something else—
 - whether it be what we might call a “good” cause like helping the poor, or self-improvement, or something bad like living as an oppressor...
 - The problem is that the he does not live in conformity with God’s counsel—with God’s word.
 - It is his own way, and that is what makes it unacceptable in the end.
 - The righteous will not accept that way—
 - God’s word is his delight—He has been reconciled to God as His God. He will not walk in the counsel of the ungodly or stand in his ways.
 - That makes him entirely different at the roots.
- B. If you read through the entire Psalter, you will see that there is hardly a Psalm that does not refer to this contrast between the godly and the ungodly in some way.
 1. Repeatedly, we see them struggling with each other—each trying to dominate.
 - There is great hostility between them.
 2. Prayer after prayer is offered up to God for deliverance from them, for God to bring them down.
 - And there are praises to God for answering those prayers, or hopes and assurances expressed that He will deliver us from them.
 3. There are praises of His word and of how wonderful it is coupled with prayers that we would indeed conform to it instead of walking in the counsel of the wicked.
 - And from time to time, there is the expression of sorrow and repentance from the righteous when they have fallen into the way of ungodliness.
- It is rather remarkable how prevalent this contrast is between the righteous and the wicked in the Psalter.

- C. We learn from this that the godly soul lives in constant tension with the wicked.
1. If you are godly, you sense the battle—
 - You are mindful of the pull of the wicked, seeking to pull you away from God into their own ways—to walk in their counsel as it says in Psalm 1.
 - You sense them resisting your efforts to follow God’s word; and even more, resisting your efforts to spread the gospel.
 2. It is not always an open battle of course.
 - The godly and the ungodly can have a common cause in the world...
 - You can work together to build a house or to develop a policy at work.
 - You can even join together in the cause of feeding the poor or something like that.
 - But the one walks without reference to God’s word and the other meditates in it day and night.
 - The godlier you are, the more this tension is felt, both by you and by the ungodly...
 - by you because you see the rebellion of the wicked toward your Lord, and you feel them trying to draw you away from your devotion...
 - and by the ungodly, not because you are rude, but simply because you are living for God and it constantly shines light into the darkness in which they are hiding.
- Sadly, the church is so weak today that the tension between the godly and the ungodly that is so prevalent in the Psalms often goes unnoticed.
3. The Psalter actually awakens our sluggish souls to this great contrast.
 - When we begin to conform our desires and sentiments to those found in the Psalms, that contrast becomes clear again...
 - We see that they are on a completely different trajectory than we are.
- But before we go any further, I must ask you a question—a very important question:
- D. Which side of the tension are you on? That of the righteous, or of the ungodly?
1. Really, when you look at what it says—who among you can say that you meditate on God’s law day and night?
 - Who among you can say that you never walk in the counsel of the ungodly?
 - If the truth were told, the way of the world has a lot more influence on you that you realise!
 2. So where does this leave you?
 - Are you somewhere in the middle? Between the righteous and the ungodly?
 - And if that is so, what does that mean about the day of judgment for you?
 - Is there some middle place for you to go?
 - Scripture consistently speaks of only two ways—either blessing or cursing; either God will accept you fully or He will reject you fully.
 - While we would all like to think that God would just accept us all, not only Psalm 1, but the entire Psalter—indeed, the entire scripture—makes it clear that we all belong either to the righteous or the ungodly.
 - Those are the two parties that confront us on every page.

3. My dear friends, this is where the gospel comes in!
 - The law of God that we meditate on and delight in is not just the commandments of God—it is the whole word of God.
 - He tells us in the word that we are fallen,
 - but He also promised from the day we fell that He would raise up a deliverer, a Son, a king, who would come to destroy Satan (that serpent of old) who deceives the whole world.
 - Our deliverer is revealed in scripture as the anointed one, Christ, the Son of David, who comes to rescue us from sin that we might be righteous.
 - He is represented by David who came to establish a kingdom of righteousness in this fallen world.
 - He is also represented by the priests offering lambs at the temple to atone for sin—He is both the priest that offers the lamb and the Lamb that is offered.
 - We do not trust in ourselves to establish the righteous kingdom of God, but we trust in God to do it through His Christ, His anointed king and priest.
 - When He calls us, He changes us so that we come to Him to be saved from our sin—He pardons us and He establishes us to walk in His ways.
 - From thenceforth, we are the righteous who walk not in the counsel of the ungodly, but who meditate on the word of God day and night.
 - That is when we enter into tension with those who are still walking outside of Christ.

TRANS> This sets the way for what we find in Psalm 2.

III. In Psalm 2, we are shown that we must have Christ if we are to have the blessing of the righteous.

A. Let's walk through Psalm 2.

1. The Psalm opens by asking why the nations rage against the LORD and against His Christ (the word anointed is the same as Christ).
 - It opens with these words: **Psalm 2:1-3: Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? ² The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, ³ “Let us break their bonds in pieces and cast away their cords from us.”**
 - It is ridiculous for them to think they can stand up against God and His Christ—but such is their commitment to walk in their own way.
 - You can see how bent they are on maintaining their independence of Him.
2. The foolishness of the wicked in resisting God is shown by His response in verses 4-6: **He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. ⁵ Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure: ⁶ “Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion.”**
 - The whole Psalter talks about the king that God set up to lead His people and to establish them in righteousness, and how He overthrows the wicked.
 - This makes up the prayers in the Psalms, the hopes of the Psalms, the praises of the Psalms—they are all about God bringing down the wicked and establishing His anointed, righteous king.

3. In verse 7-9, the LORD declares what we saw in Psalm 1—that the righteous will be blessed and established while the wicked will be destroyed...
 - Only in Psalm 2, it is described as God raising up His Christ as the One who will inherit the nations as His people and who will destroy those who oppose Him.
 - **Ps 2:7-9: I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.”**
 - It is Christ and His kingdom which will be established.
 - The Psalter is all about the struggle involved in bringing about this kingdom.
4. Psalm 2 ends with advice for the nations to come and be a part of Christ and His kingdom.
 - Psalm 2:10-12: **Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.**
 - Do you see the pathway to the blessing—the same blessing that is described in Psalm 1?
 - It is to come and acknowledge the Son, the Christ...
 - Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.
 - We come to King Jesus, looking Him to restore us to God so that we are those who live for Him, walking not in the counsel of the ungodly but delighting in His word—as God.
 - We see how wrong we were to live apart from God, and we come to Jesus Christ (the Son God raised up) to be restored to God.
 - Blessed are all those who put their trust in God’s Christ.
 - Cursed are all those who do not—who continue in their own way.

TRANS> What a wonderful and gracious thing it is that the LORD has raised up His anointed one to establish a righteous kingdom in this fallen world!

- Without Him, we would have no way to obtain blessing—
- So these two Psalms set the focus of the entire Psalter...
 - There is the great contrast and struggle between the righteous who live according to God’s word in Christ, and the wicked who oppose them.
 - The righteous will be blessed and the wicked will perish.

IV. Now let’s take a walk through the entire Psalter and see the out-breathings of the soul of Christ and His church in this sinful world.

- We will look at these out-breathings in each of the five books of the Psalter.
- A. In Book 1, running from Psalm 3 to 41, we cry out with our king to be delivered from the wicked and to be established.
- In brief, this section is dominated by the prayer for God’s kingdom to come!
 - All of the Psalms here are written by David when he was struggling against the forces of those who did not want him to establish a righteous kingdom for God.

- Of course, the church is always involved in such prayers, but it is especially the case in the places where the church is being established for the first time.
 - Christ and His people meet resistance from the ungodly, and they pray for deliverance as David did when he was seeking to be a king for God.
 - These prayers dominate the first book of the Psalms.
 - These prayers are all laced with confidence in God that He will come through for us in the end as we cry to Him—
 - Psalm 22 has our king suffering on the cross with cries for deliverance;
 - but then coming forth to establish His kingdom among the nations when He has been heard.
 - Psalm 40 at the end of book one, speaks of brings Him and us with Him being brought out of the horrible pit and established...
 - all because King Jesus has come to do the will of God as it is written.
 - Psalm 41 ends the book with the assurance the God will raise up the righteous, delivering them from the wicked!
- B. In Book 2, David’s prayers continue to dominate with a few others mixed in.
- The focus is on the power of God to rescues David and the kingdom of righteousness while enemies oppose.
 - The LORD is often referred to as God (Elohim) and as the Mighty God.
 - His invincible power is often described and praised.
 - The benediction at the end of Book 2—in Psalm 72:18-19—expresses this confidence in the LORD as God.
 - It says: **Ps 72:18-19: Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! ¹⁹ And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen.**
 - God’s greatness and strength is seen in raising up David’s kingdom, just as it is seen today in Christ when the church is established in this and that place.
 - In Psalm 42 and 43, confidence is found (when we ask why our soul is disquieted and then tell ourselves to hope in God)...
 - And in Psalm 72 at the end of the book, you have the glorious kingdom described where God’s king is given righteous rule over the nations and peace ensues.
 - This was experienced in shadow form when David was established as king over all Israel and the nations came to honour him.
 - It is our hope in Christ.
 - Interestingly, at the very end of Book 2—there is this statement in Psalm 72:20 that “the prayers of David are ended.”
 - It is not that there are no more Psalms of David in the Psalter,
 - but rather that this collection of prayers yearning for kingdom to come are ended because the kingdom of David has been established.
 - This sets the way for Book 3.
- C. With Book 3, there is the struggle that came after David’s days when the righteous kingdom he established failed—
- David’s throne was overthrown and the kingdom went into exile.

1. How the godly struggle when the church loses its dominion in the land!
 - Psalm 73 heads it off with the confession of the righteous of envying the wicked in their seeming prosperity—the chaff seems to be flourishing better than the tree of Psalm 1...
 - In Psalm 74, there is the coming of the enemy to destroy the temple.
 - Confidence in God is still expressed in this book, but the prayers are prayed out of the kingdom that once stood and is now crumbling...
 2. The book ends at Psalm 89 where the song begins with high praise for God's covenant mercy and faithfulness, but ends up asking in desperation how it could be that David's house has fallen.
 - It deals with the reality that the house of David that was supposed to endure forever has fallen into the hands of the wicked.
 - This is the sort of thing that we struggle with in the West where the church has crumbled.
- D. Book 4 begins with Psalm 90, the prayer of Moses that was prayed when Israel had been sent to wander in the wilderness.
- God had delivered His people powerfully from Egypt, but now they are in the wilderness because of their sin.
 - It is parallel to what had happened to the house of David when the Psalter was compiled—God had established the kingdom and it had fallen.
 - Yet, Book 4 is full of calls to come together to worship God and to sing of the deliverance that He brings to His people anyway—like Ezra and Nehemiah did.
 - The benediction at the end of the book captures the theme of book 4:
 - **Psalm 106:47-48: Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the Gentiles, to give thanks to Your holy name, to triumph in Your praise. ⁴⁸ Blessed *be* the LORD God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD!**
 - Our purpose is to praise God—this book is full of calls to worship.
- E. And then Book 5 has even more Psalms of praise and thanksgiving to God.
- It begins with Psalm 107 which calls us to give thanks to Him for redeeming us...and Book 5 carries on with that theme until the end.
 - You have Psalm 110 where our king is seen at God's right hand.
 - You have that Great Hallel that includes Psalm 113-118 where God is praised for His covenant mercy in raising up the righteous...especially in raising up the stone that was rejected by the builders.
 - There is Psalm 119 where we affirm our delight in the word of God as those who, delight in His law and meditate on it day and night...
 - Dominant in this section is the Psalms of Ascent (from Psalm 120-134) where the people are going up to worship God at His holy temple...
 - And then there are the final hallelujah psalms finishing out the Psalter from Psalm 146 to Psalm 150.

Conclusion: These are the faithful out-breathings of the soul of Christ and all His people—of the righteous—in every age...

- As David's kingdom waxed and waned of old and as the church waxes and wanes today, the godly lift up these prayers and praises with Christ.
 - The tension is there between those who want God to reign and those who want independence from Him.
- See that more and more, by the grace of God, you unite your soul to these songs.
 - There is nothing in the Psalms that is not pure and holy—nothing that we cannot bring before God in the name of King Jesus.
 - What a blessing for us that God has given us a righteous king who is able to establish His righteous kingdom forever.
 - **Psalm 1:1-2: Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.**
- If you are not in Christ, you need to be!
 - And if you are, you need to (Col 3:16) **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.**