

PSALMS - A STUDY GUIDE

THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
 - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. How many different people do you think contributed to the Psalms? How long a time span do you think is covered by the Psalms? Do you consider them all inspired? Who wrote the most? Do you consider the hymns in our hymn books as being inspired? Why would the Psalms be different? Do you think there were uninspired "Psalms" that may have been used in the temple services? Would it be safe to pick a verse from any portion of the Psalms and use it by itself apart from its context?
2. What would happen to the Psalms if our Bibles were organized in a strictly chronological order? (See Psalms 90; 51; 137. Who is credited with writing these Psalms?)
3. Do you think some of the Psalms were actually more like prayers? If a psalmist is angry, discouraged or depressed and cries out to God, should we consider his cry, including the words of despair or discouragement as "inspired?" In what sense? Is it all right to express feelings of depression? What about Jesus' cry at the cross (Matthew 27:46) or in Gethsemane?
4. The Psalms were a form of Hebrew poetry. We sometimes speak of "poetic license." When David spoke of soaking his bed with his tears (Psalms 6:6) don't you think this was a little exaggerated? Is it okay for someone to use hyperbole under inspiration?
5. Is everything that we sing in our hymns today theologically accurate? What do we mean when we sing "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me?" If prayer is "conversation with God as with a friend" how could we "sing while passing through the air, farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer?" Is it that we never plan to speak to God again? Do we feel comfortable singing about one of God's children as "such a worm as I?" Should healthy heterosexual men feel comfortable singing "I come to the garden alone, He walks with me, and talks with me and tells me I am His own?" (Or is God also female?)
6. What should we do with passages in the Psalms which appear to be contrary to our Christian understanding of God? For example:

Psalms 2:11,12 "Serve the Lord with fear...lest he be angry...for his wrath is quickly kindled." (RSV)

Psalms 77:10 "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed!" (RSV)

Would it ever be proper to describe the wrath of God as "quickly kindled?" We have many verses that say God is "slow to anger." (Compare Exodus 34:6,7; Numbers 14:18; Psalms 103:8; 148:8; Proverbs 15:18; 16:32; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3; Nehemiah 9:17) What should we do with such conflicts? Should we collect all the verses and "stack them up" or "compare" them somehow? Or count them? Should we look for evidence in the stories to see if God is actually quick to get angry? Or should we just admit that this is a Biblical contradiction? After reading the second Psalm for worship, what would you pray about? How do you suppose Jesus spoke the words, "You are of your father, the devil?" John 8:44 (RSV) What do we do with passages which appear to be shocking, or harsh, or authoritarian? Would it be all right for a mother to cry out as her child is dying? Was David still loyal and totally committed despite all these cries?

7. Should we just read the Psalms that we like and which express uplifting thoughts—like Psalms 19 and 23—and try to ignore the others?
8. What should we do with "inspired prayers" that seem to call down God's wrath and vengeance on all of Israel's enemies? For example:

Psalms 18:34-50: "He trains my hands for war,...I pursued my enemies and overtook them; and did not turn back till they were consumed...I thrust them through...they fell under my feet. For thou didst gird me with strength for the battle...those who hated me I destroyed. They cried for help, but there was none to save, They cried to the Lord, but he did not answer them. I beat them fine as dust before the wind; I cast them out like the mire of the streets." (RSV) [See 2 Samuel 22:35-51]

Psalms 58:6-9:

⁶ Break the teeth of these fierce lions, O God.
⁷ May they disappear like water draining away;
may they be crushed like weeds on a path.
⁸ May they be like snails that dissolve into slime;
may they be like a baby born dead that never sees the light.
⁹ Before they know it, they are cut down like weeds;
in his fierce anger God will blow them away
while they are still living.
¹⁰ The righteous will be glad when they see sinners punished;
they will wade through the blood of the wicked.
¹¹ People will say, "The righteous are indeed rewarded;
there is indeed a God who judges the world." (GNB)

See also: Psalms 68:21-23; Psalms 69:22-28

Psalms 137:8,9: "Happy is the man who...takes your babies and smashes them against a rock."
(GNB) Compare Hosea 13:16; Amos 1:13; Nahum 3:10.

9. Have you ever thanked God for helping you to do something and later realized that that was not what God wanted you to do at all? Does God "wince" at some of the methods we use in "evangelism?" When He blesses us anyway, doesn't He look even more gracious?
10. Didn't David have a clear understanding of the place and purpose of sacrifices and offerings? (Psalms 40:6-8; 51:16-19) What God really wants is a willingness to listen—an open ear.
11. Why would the Bible say "Wake up Lord!" (Psalms 44:23; Compare 1 Kings 18:27—Elijah and the priests of Baal)? How does this fit with Psalms 121:3,4?
12. Which of the Psalms would you say reveals, more than any other, that David was a man after God's own heart? (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) Psalm 23? Psalm 51? If you had just done what David did to Bathsheba and Uriah how would you pray? David went to God in confidence that he could be forgiven. Think of the picture David had of God. Had David gone too far? Do you think it was David's attitude that made him a man after God's own heart? How could David say, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned?" (Psalms 51:4) After such an experience shouldn't the most serious consideration be our attitude toward God? Often when we do wrong we think of what it will do to our reputation or what our fellow men will think of us. How often do we consider what effect our actions as Christians will have on God's reputation?
13. The Holy Spirit through the Psalms helps us to see ourselves as we really are. If I hate Mr. Smith, I am not telling the truth if I kneel at night and say, "Dear Lord, how I love Mr. Smith. Do bless Mr. Smith." Could we be honest with God when we pray, "Lord, I hate Brother Smith?" Could we then ask for healing and cleansing? (Psalms 51:10; Psalms 19:14; Psalms 139:23,24)

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