

ISRAEL'S HYMNAL
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An Exposition of the Psalms

During my recent lecture tour throughout Canada and the United States, from which I have just returned, I had the privilege of speaking to literally thousands of people, scores of whom insisted that I write a book on the Psalms. I am safe in saying that during the past ten years hundreds of people have made this same request. The Lord willing, I hope to do this at some future date but cannot attempt the task at this present time. But, in order to meet the growing demand for a sane, sound, and detailed study of the Book of Psalms, I am beginning a series of expositions on the same, of which this article is the introduction, always cherishing the hope that someday, if it be God's will, I may have the delightful privilege of expounding the entire Book and putting it in the form of a set of volumes to pass on to posterity—if the Lord tarry. In this formal notice of the forthcoming series I wish to call attention to some vital facts that must be understood clearly if one is to appreciate fully the messages of the Psalms.

Let us bear in mind that Psalms form one of the books of the Old Testament. It was Israel's songbook which was given to aid her in her liturgical worship. It is therefore purely Jewish. It served for Israel the same purpose that Christian hymnals do for us. Without doubt our songbooks are a great aid to us in our worship of God Almighty and in our exhorting one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, which we should sing to the praise of God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the Book of Psalms is purely an Israelitish book, given to her by men of God, it is most important that we understand this fact. Every theme discussed pertains to the Jewish people in particular. Some, however, as a close examination of them will reveal have a world outlook and deal with international problems. No Christian church can take over the Book of Psalms and use it in an understanding manner in worshipping the Lord as directed in the New Testament. Only by adapting certain of the selections can we use them in Christian worship.

Let us bear in mind that Israel's songbook was absolutely and infallibly inspired by the Spirit of God. Every word should be studied in the light of its context to ascertain what the Spirit had in mind by His selection of it. Unlike Israel's psalter are our hymnbooks, which we Christians employ. Some editor selects various hymns written by different authors and compiles a songbook. These hymn writers are not inspired. They have, as a rule, poetical ability. They are impressed with some great truth or truths and they wish to pass on to their fellow-Christians the blessing which has come to their lives. They therefore write these poems and set them to music or else have someone with musical ability to write the tunes and harmonies for them. Very frequently the sentiments expressed in such hymns are non-biblical; in fact, often they are contrary to the plain teaching of the Word of God. The difference, therefore, between Israel's songbook and those which we have is simply this: Her psalter was absolutely inspired; our hymn books are not.

The popular idea is that David wrote the Psalms. An examination of the various compositions in that book will show that he did not write all of them. It is true that he wrote many of them. According to the superscription of Psalm 90, Moses was the human author of that composition. Ethan, the Ezrahite, was the human author of Psalm 89. Psalm 88 was composed by the sons of Korah. Psalms 73-83 were written

by Asaph, but Psalm 72 was written by Solomon. By this casual glance at the Book of Psalms we see that God honored various servants of His by permitting them to give Israel this most wonderful songbook.

While we like to know who the human author of a psalm or a passage of scripture was, it is not essential for us to have that information. All that is necessary for us to know is that such scriptures were given by the Spirit of God and that they are His infallible messages to man. Sometimes, however, when we know who the human author was and can understand the situation out of which it grew or rather the occasion upon which God made a special revelation, we can understand the message more clearly. For this consideration alone, we become interested in the human author.

Some of us think that the Book of Psalms is purely devotional. Whenever a person is appointed to bring a devotional message at some special meeting, we naturally expect the speaker to turn to one of the psalms, in all probability. While there is much devotional material in the Psalms, let us bear in mind that it is not purely a devotional book. Inspirational messages are essential to the growth and development of our spiritual lives; but it takes something more than sentiment and feeling to produce growth. We must have the meat of the Word as well as the milk.

Many of the psalms are individualistic in their content and outlook. For instance, such psalms as 23, 25, 26, 27, 103, and 139, strike the individualistic note and give comfort and cheer to the people of God. Of course, one must be absolutely certain that he is one of the Lord's own in order for him to claim any of the blessings which He promises to His people.

There are other psalms that are individualistic but that deal with the problems of life. For instance, when David was driven from his kingdom by the revolt of his son Absalom, he was in exile in the Transjordan. During this period he was thrown entirely upon the mercy of God. He therefore by the Spirit prayed and wrote the morning petition constituting Psalm 3 and the evening prayer known as Psalm 4. Psalm 30 deals with a crisis which came up in the life of King David. Psalm 51 gives the prayer that he uttered when he was brought under conviction of sin. It must be studied in the light of such passages as II Samuel, chapter 12. Psalm 55 can be understood only in connection with the historical account concerning the plot and revolt against David. Psalm 73 deals with the case and experience of Asaph who allowed jealousy and envy to rankle in his heart. These are typical psalms dealing with special problems in the lives of the true servants of God among the Israelites. Of course, the interpretation must be sought first and, if there is a principle that is universal in its application, it may be applied to people of God today under similar circumstances.

Other psalms are purely nationalistic in their outlook and deal with past and future problems. For instance, in Psalm 78, 105, 106, and 114, together with Psalm 137, we see historical events in the national life of Israel discussed. These are indeed instructive and informative.

On the other hand, there are predictions relating to the future of Israel. For instance, in Psalm 44 we see such a forecast. Psalm 79 gives a vivid picture of Israel in the Tribulation. Psalm 95, on the other hand, is a prediction concerning the appearance of God in the person of Messiah in Israel—when he came nineteen hundred years ago—and is a passionate appeal for the Jews of the first century to accept Christ. No one can understand the Book of Hebrews who does not approach it from the standpoint of Psalm 95, which in its message was prophetic. Psalms 72, 132, and 147 deal with the future of Israel and her land. Psalm 149 foretells God's special assistance that he will give to the faithful remnant when they turn to him in the latter part of the great Tribulation.

But in Psalm 24, 80, and 90 we see predictions concerning the penitential prayers that Israel will utter when she, having been evangelized, is convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel message and will be pleading for God to have mercy upon her and to deliver her.

There are numbers of psalms that are purely messianic in their import. For instance, Psalm 2 foretells the forthcoming international, atheistic, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, politico-religious convention, which will in its deliberations and decisions rule God out of His universe. Notwithstanding its actions God will carry out His decree and promise to King Messiah that He shall rule the earth with a rod of iron. Psalm 16 is a prediction of the resurrection of Messiah. Psalm 22 foretold the manner of His execution (vss. 1-21); whereas, its second portion foretells His glorious reign upon the earth. Psalm 110 likewise deals with forecasts regarding King Messiah. In fact, it gives His whole redemptive career.

There are other Psalms that are devotional in their character and that feed the soul upon that which is necessary for it to thrive.

In this series I shall pick out various types of psalms according to contents and discuss them.