

Introduction to the Psalms

Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Johnnie Eargle Cadieux Professor of Hebrew Bible

Phillips Theological Seminary

These Lenten devotions will focus on some of the psalms included as readings for the season of Lent in the Revised Common Lectionary (Psalms 51, 91, 27, 32, 119, and 31). Before engaging the Psalms, a basic understanding of these ancient prayers is needed.

The name of this collection of prayers, "Psalms," comes from the Septuagint's (LXX) Greek title, *psalmoi*, suggesting songs sung with musical instruments for accompaniment. In the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew title is *tehillim*, meaning "praises." As we will see, this concept that all prayer was a way of praising God is key to understanding the Psalms. Even angry laments are a means of praising the Divine, but I will say more about that in another devotional.

The Psalter is often referred to as the "hymnbook of the second Temple," reflecting the belief that the Book of Psalms got its final shape in the period of rebuilding the Temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel (circa 520-515 BCE). However, we are basically ignorant about the date of composition for most of these psalms (except maybe Psalm 137, which could not have been written prior to the Babylonian exile, circa 586 BCE). It is possible that some were actually composed in the pre-exilic period of David and Solomon (10th century) or even earlier. In fact, some of these prayers are probably very ancient.

The Psalter is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible because it is the only one that contains nothing but prayers. While other books contain prayers, they are usually set within the context of a narrative. The Psalms is a collection of prayers that must stand on their own, without any supporting story. We see examples of psalms being reused (used for the first time) in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, as in the parallel between 2 Sam 22 and Psalm 18.

The Book of Psalms is the most frequently encountered biblical text among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls and fragments of scrolls reveal that the communities behind the texts knew of most of the 150 canonical psalms, but we also find other psalms that were not ultimately canonized. These are intermingled with the canonical psalms, and the order varies. This implies that the fixed order, editing, of the Psalter was still in flux as late as the 1st or 2nd centuries CE.

The Book of Psalms is of great importance for the church because of its influence on hymns, theology, worship, understandings of God, and prayer. Obviously, some shape of the Psalter was known and important for Jesus and his followers, as it was for the early Christian community. The Psalms also provides a rich resource of prayer and worship materials for today. It reflects the gamut of human emotions and experiences.

Sunday, March 10, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 51](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

There are 60 laments in the Psalter, prayers describing a world that seems to be spinning out of control. These prayers of “disorientation”¹ expressed the concerns and needs of an individual/community experiencing suffering and feeling that God could (should) do something to make the situation better. There are more laments in the Book of Psalms than any other identifiable form (even Hymns of Praise). Given the human experience, which is often filled with pain and uncertainty, this statistic is not surprising. What is intriguing is that the Hebrew title of this biblical book (*tehillim*) translates as “Praises.” Those who preserved this collection of ancient petitions gifted us with some very important wisdom: there is nothing we can’t say in conversation with God, and all types of prayer are acts of praising God, even if we are not sure that God is listening.

In Psalm 51, the psalmist has done something wrong and has experienced the “crush” (v 8b) of guilt and the pain of God’s disappointment (v 4b), and the request is for God’s “mercy” and forgiveness (v 1). This psalm follows the usual pattern for an “Individual Lament”: Address to God (v 1); Complaint/Confession (vv 3-5); Confession of Trust (v 6); Petition (vv 7-11); Words of Assurance (v 12); and Vow of Praise (vv 13-15). The only exception is the occurrence of a Petition in vv 1b-2. It is not unusual for laments to rearrange the different parts of the structure, and we might explain this aberration as being due to the effusive emotions of a person who is desperate for God’s forgiveness.

Psalm 51 seems to be an appropriate psalm for the 1st week of Lent, a season marked by many Christians as a time for self-examination and confession of transgressions. Psalm 51 offers the opportunity to reflect about the need to recognize and confess sins. However, the psalm also reminds us that God forgives, even before we recognize and name our wrongdoings. Laments, like Psalm 51, also provide a ritual way for us to move from “disorientation” to “reorientation”, even if nothing about our situation noticeably changes; it comes as a result of being “heard” by the Divine.

¹ The term, “disorientation”, is borrowed from Walter Brueggemann. He uses this as a category to classify the psalms, along with “orientation” and “new orientation,” in his book, *The Message of the Psalms* (Fortress, 1985).

Sunday, March 17, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 91](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

This psalm reads like a liturgy promising Divine protection. Perhaps these words were used by a congregation at a time of national crisis. The priest might begin with an invitation to the congregation to express their trust in the LORD (v 1). To which, they would respond "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust" (v 2). Once they had proclaimed their trust in the LORD, the priest would assure them by providing a description of the kind of protection the LORD offers to those who call upon the LORD's name (vv 3-16). Then, maybe with a response of "amen", the people would return to their daily living with some level of trust that God will not abandon them in their time of need.

Psalm 91 is also a psalm of trust. In a world turned upside down, it is reassuring to hear that God is in control. When things happen to us for no apparent reason, we might be comforted by the confidence that God is watching over us. In some contexts, the words of this psalm could provide the courage to do something difficult, to take a stand that could get us into trouble. We take those bold steps confident that God delivers those that love God (v 14a) and grants them salvation (v 16b).

These promises made by God sound wonderful (e.g. being able to walk on a snake, surviving attacks on one's life, etc.), almost like giving someone superhero powers. However, when read through one's life experience, these protections can also seem like a cruel joke. If we have faith in the LORD, no earthly threat will overwhelm us. No matter how much faith one has, that is not a guarantee of a life without pain, suffering, and death. If that were true, would all the saints (both church-identified and others) have suffered in the ways they did and continue to do? Human beings are susceptible to disease; we are mortal.

Perhaps what this psalm is trying to communicate is that, when we trust in God, no matter what befalls us, we know that the LORD is always present. We need not see illness or other forms of suffering as a punishment from God or as a sign that the LORD has abandoned us. Things happen in life that cannot be explained, and even if we could explain them, the pain would still remain. This does not mean that we cannot get angry with God about tragedies, but the very fact that we can express those feelings to God is a statement of faith and trust. By doing so, we are declaring that God does hear our prayers and cares about what happens to humanity. This may not be the kind of protection we want, but it may be just enough assurance that grants us comfort.

Sunday, March 24, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 27](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Psalm 27 is a "mixed-type psalm." It contains both a "Thanksgiving Psalm" (vv 1-6) and a "Lament" (vv 7-14). The first three verses of Psalm 27 are a powerful statement of confidence and trust. The key theme is "fear" and how the psalmist's relationship with the LORD empowers her/him not to be afraid. These words could be spoken either in a public context as a "testimony" to the protection of the LORD, or they could be words that the psalmist says to her/himself as a mantra of assurance, before facing a challenge or before moving into the next phase of the prayer, which describes the psalmist's desire to be in the "house of the LORD" (v 4b), which in this context refers to the Temple. In the Temple, the psalmist finds "shelter" and protection (v 5). From that high place, the psalmist can focus on worshiping the LORD (v 6).

Having established a sense of safety and proclaimed a desire to be in the LORD's presence, the psalmist is ready to move into the lament portion of the psalm. Suddenly, the confidence and comfort of the psalmist turns into a sense of being abandoned by the LORD (vv 7-9). The worries about the psalmist's "enemies" (v 11) have not really gone away, but seem to have been hovering in the shadows of her/his mind. Or, perhaps new "adversaries" (v 12a) have emerged, slandering the psalmist and carrying a threat of violence (v 12b). After a desperate plea for God's protection, the psalm concludes with more words of assurance. The psalmist proclaims (either privately or to others) that there will be better days ahead (v 13). The LORD's salvation will come, but it will arrive in God's own time. "Courage" and patience are required in the meantime (v14).

Psalm 27 reads like an emotional roller coaster ride, with hills of confidence and drops of doubt all done at a confusing and chaotic speed. In this way, Psalm 27 is a microcosm of the entire Psalter. Within these 150 prayers, we find the full gamut of human experiences (e.g., joy, sadness, fear, trust, etc.). Just as scholars like it better when a biblical text fits into a predictable pattern, we want life to do the same. When the text or our life defy our desire for organization, we are forced to find new ways to interpret both the biblical material and our experiences. Fresh patterns emerge, and a fuller comprehension of the world develops. Yet, through it all, we can affirm the words of psalmist, "Wait for the LORD and be strong; let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!" (v 14)

Sunday, March 31, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 32](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

This psalm is a "hymn of thanksgiving" that contains the responses of the psalmist to an experience of God's salvation. Having endured a time of suffering, about which no specifics are given, this person understands that experience as a time of self-revelation. In the midst of "wasting away" and "groaning" (v 3), the psalmist identified some aspect of her/his life that was incongruent with God's will and asked God for forgiveness. No longer burdened with a sense of guilt, the psalmist was able to acknowledge the healing grace of God.

A "hymn of thanksgiving," like Psalm 32, may have been preceded by a "lament." This earlier prayer cried out to God in hopes of being healed or saved. An important part of a lament is a promise made by the one praying that, if God answers the person's prayer, they will sing God's praises to all who will listen. In Psalm 32, the psalmist perhaps is keeping just such a promise by encouraging all who find themselves in times of trouble to "offer prayer" to God, with the assurance that God will answer their prayers as well. All who call upon the name of the LORD will find a "hiding place" and will enjoy protection from whatever threatens them.

A change of speaker occurs in vv 8-9; now God makes assurances to the psalmist (and all the faithful). Among the chaos of life, God promises to "instruct", "teach", and provide individualized "counsel" for those who will take advantage of such opportunities. The Divine also offers a warning about the kind of behavior that leads to right relationship with God, but this is provided in the negative: "Do not be like a horse or a mule." These two animals are used to represent stupidity and stubbornness, obstacles that may prevent a person from receiving the Divine's education.

In the concluding verses, the psalmist again speaks, but this time the message is less personal and more of a general statement about the nature of the Divine. The psalmist declares that the lives of the faithful are easier than the lives of the wicked; one enjoys the LORD's "steadfast love" and the other knows only "torment."

The claims of Psalm 32 have to be handled with great care. The assertion that one's suffering is caused by unrecognized sin is theologically troubling and dangerous. However, there may be a possibility to discuss how difficult experiences sometimes provide an opportunity for self-reflection and the recognition of aspects of one's life that could be changed. In fact, the temptation to see illness, or other problems, as a divine punishment can be very harmful, but if we accept ourselves for who God created us to be, it is possible to know wholeness, regardless of how the current situation is resolved. That is a reason to tell others about the "steadfast love" of God. How do our words and actions proclaim the "steadfast love" of the Divine?

Sunday, April 7, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 119](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

The longest psalm of the Psalter, Psalm 119 often gets overlooked by those seeking a resource either for their own devotions or for public worship. At 176 verses, this prayer is a bit daunting and certainly does not lend itself to a call to worship or other liturgical use, amidst the other parts of a typical worship service. Yet, Psalm 119 is an incredible testament to poetic skill and dedication. What is lost in most English translations is the fact that it is an alphabetic acrostic poem with 22 stanzas of eight lines, within each stanza all eight lines begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In English, this would be the equivalent of eight lines beginning with "A," eight lines beginning with "B," and so forth. The visual effect of the original Hebrew text is impressive, but the intricacies of Psalm 119 do not end there. All but two verses of the psalm contain either the word, "torah" (teaching), or one of seven synonyms for that word (e.g., ordinance, statute, etc.). Based on the acrostic form, most scholars have identified Psalm 119 as a "Wisdom Psalm." In my opinion, this psalm defies any typical "type" or label; it is a psalm of a different type.

The beauty of Psalm 119 is how the psalmist has skillfully utilized the alphabet and the synonyms to create a prayer that celebrates God as the one who teaches humanity the way to live a righteous life. The opening eight verses are a good example of the poetic artistry of Psalm 119. The stanza opens with a declaration that happiness comes to those who follow God's "torah", a word that is often translated as "law" in English (especially Christian) bibles, but this is a very biased rendering. In Hebrew, the word "torah" has the broader sense of "teaching," which at times includes the legal materials of the Hebrew Bible.

Today, Psalm 119 might be seen as a rigid and legalistic text with no contemporary application. Christians could see its focus on, and celebration of, the "law" as being irrelevant to their faith. However, with some corrective translation, broadening the definition of "torah" to include "teaching," readers should be able to better appreciate the psalm. We still need God to "teach" us the right way to live, to guide us in making good choices and caring for our neighbors. Perhaps in our chaotic world, full of technological and medical advances moving faster than our comprehension, the orderliness of Psalm 119 can provide a welcome stability. Its structure resembles a routine (e.g., diet, exercise, spiritual discipline, etc.) that can help us find our center (God?) and live in ways that are consistent with God's teaching.

Sunday, April 14, 2019

A Reflection on [Psalm 31](#)

By: Rev. Dr. Lisa W. Davison

Psalm 31 is a fairly long individual lament, and like most laments, Psalm 31 opens with a call for God's attention and action, interwoven with assertions of trust (vv 1-2). The psalmist describes God with powerful images of strength and security (vv 3-4): "rock," "fortress," and "refuge." Expressing a sense of being hunted and trapped, the psalmist prays to be delivered from the "net" lying in wait for her/him (v 4). With no other options, this sufferer places her/his life in God's "hand" (v 5). This ultimate expression of trust may also be understood as a sign of resignation. Having no power to overcome the current situation, the psalmist desperately hopes that God can. The psalmist professes that their entire being is reliant on God.

After describing the situation that predicates the prayer of lament (vv 6-18), the closing section of Psalm 31 (vv 19-24) returns to the strong statements of trust in God and in God's ability to make things right, to tame the "chaos" of the psalmist's experience. The imagery found in vv 1-5 appears once again. Those who "take refuge" in God will benefit from God's abundant grace (v 19). Divine "shelter" is provided for the faithful and keeps them safe from those who would do them harm (v 20). A testimony to God's "steadfast love" is provided in vv 21-22.

We are left to wonder if this last section was added later, after the psalmist experienced rescue from her/his suffering (v 22). The psalm concludes with words of encouragement to the faithful congregation; "love the LORD... Be strong... take courage... all you who wait for the LORD" (vv 23-24). These verses also seem like a late addition, perhaps when this individual lament was adapted for liturgical use. This person's experience of God's "salvation" could be used as a lesson about faith and an encouragement for the gathered community in a time of distress. How do we name the chaos of our lives paired with an assurance of Divine presence in all situations?