

Introduction to Psalms

This material on Introduction to Psalms is adapted from the studies of Chester McCalley, the pastor of Beth Haven Bible church in North Kansas City, Missouri. His publications department has a rich archive of expositional and topical Bible studies, available on a grace basis. Tapes, literature, and catalogs are available from: Word of Truth, Box 10514, Kansas City, MO 64118

Introduction to Psalms

When you study the Psalms, there are some main features to keep in mind.

1. Psalms covers the entire range of human feelings and emotions. You will see David's fears, longings, doubts, hopes, joys, and sorrows.
2. Psalms provides an inspired book for worship. Worship consists of occupation with God himself and satisfaction with him. Psalm 73:25 expresses total devotion, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee."
3. Psalms provide much prophecy. At least 16 Psalms prophecy of Christ. And Israel's past, present, and future are portrayed. It is not unusual for a Psalm to view the millennial reign of the Messiah and portray Israel at peace.
4. Psalms tells us of the experience of the wicked. We are told of the thoughts of the wicked, the manner of life of the wicked, his hatred of saints, and his final doom.

The Psalms is poetry - Hebrew poetry. At the heart of all poetry is rhythm. In English, rhythm is achieved by repetition of the sound or accent of words. In Hebrew, rhythm comes from repetition of thought or ideas. This principle is called parallelism, and there are three main types:

1. Synonymous parallelism is the same thought expressed in different words (Psalm 3:1).

2. Antithetic parallelism occurs when ideas are set in contrast to one another (Psalm 1:6).
3. In Synthetic parallelism the thought is added to or developed (Psalm 1:2).

PSALM 1

The first Psalm should be considered as a prologue to the whole book of 150 Psalms. One reason to suppose this is that Psalm 1 has no superscription as do the rest of the Psalms. (The superscriptions are part of the original Hebrew text and are regarded as inspired.) The introductory nature of Psalm 1 is also shown in its theme, a contrast of the experience of the godly and the wicked.

Psalm 1:1-3, the riches of the righteous.

Verse 1 contains the idea of progression.

There are three degrees of habit, seen in three verbs: "walks", "stands", "sits". Each verb expresses a completed action and a habit that has been acquired.

There are three degrees of evil: "ungodly", "sinners", "scornful".

There are three degrees of openness: "counsel" (hidden advice), "way" (the more public life), and "seat" (the assembly or consensus).

The first word of importance is the word "blessed". This word is plural - "blessednesses". In Hebrew, plural may express the idea of more than one, but it can also be used to denote greatness and fullness. Hence, "many and great and full is the happiness" of the man described in this Psalm. Every area of his life is permeated with joy. Verse 2 will tell us why he is this way.

The word "blessed" is in the construct form. It is like the expression "ring of gold" in English - it serves to make two words into one, two words welded together into one idea. The idea is that full happiness and the man are inseparable.

The believer who has full happiness

"He walks not in the counsel of the ungodly..."

The Hebrew word “walk” (halak) often refers to the physical act of walking. But it can be figuration, as it is here, and it means “to conduct oneself” or “to live”. It is used of one’s moral-spiritual life, and it shows that this has become his fixed habit.

The word “counsel” (atsah) means both “advice” and “purpose of design”. (See Psalm 33:10,11; 73:24; 106:43) The happy man does not live according to the advice and goals of the ungodly. He relates to God’s counsel and goals.

He rejects the advice and counsel of the “ungodly” (reshaim). The Hebrew word for “ungodly” means to be loose and unregulated, and it is consistently used in the Psalms for the enemies of God and His people (Psalm 17:13; 71:4; 109:2,6).

“He does not stand in the way of sinners...”

The word “way” (derek) means “road”, literally. Figuratively, as it is used here, it means “course of life”, as in Psalm 10:5, 35:6, 37:5, and many other places. The happy man first rejects the mentality of the world and then the lifestyle of the world.

The people whose lifestyle he rejects are called “sinners.” This word comes from the common verb for sinning in the Old Testament, hata, which means “to miss the mark.” The “mark”, of course, is the glory of God, which we all miss (Rom. 3:23). It refers to those who have failed with respect to God’s character and standards.

“He does not sit in the seat of the scornful.”

The word “seat” is moshav, a “place of sitting down.” The term involves pride (Prov. 21:24) and resistance to correction (Psalm 15:12)

Notes on Psalm 1:1:

- The root of the happy man’s life is rejection of man’s viewpoint in favor of God’s viewpoint. This is the heart of true separation.
- The Psalmist has a correct view of conduct. There are only two kinds of men here, righteous and wicked.
- The happy man carefully guards what comes into his mind.

Verse 2 deals with what the happy man does do.

He stands in strong contrast to the ungodly person of verse 1. The word “but” means “on the contrary”, a strong contrast.

He “delights in the law of the Lord”, the word denoting attention, longing, delight, concentration.

He is occupied with the Lord. The same word is use of the Lord’s attitude toward His word in Isa. 42:21. Note that one word, “delight”, is used to describe the whole inner man.

The word “law” is torah, meaning “instruction.”

The word “meditate” is hagah, meaning “to growl” or “to moan.” It is used of the low sound of a person reading aloud over and over in low tones, to impress the material on one’s mind, or to commit the contents to memory.

Verse 3 shows the character of the happy man.

Verses 1 to 3 speak of a “man” and refer to the man by pronouns such as “his” and “he.” Then, in verses 4 to 6, the man that stands in contrast is called “ungodly.” The application is that true happiness is godliness, and godliness consists in total occupation with God as revealed in His Word.

The godly man in his inner life is said to be “settled”. He is said to be “like a tree planted by the rivers of water...” Note the image here. The tree is described as to its roots, its fruit, and its leaves. The tree is “planted by the rivers of water...”. The water is the source of life to the tree.

The word “rivers” is tied closely to the word “waters.” These words are used of watercourses which are used to irrigate gardens and parks. When all of the surrounding land was burned and parched, these channels of water formed a bright strip of green (1 Kings 18:5). To be near the waters (in an arid land) was the essence of security, productivity, and survival. The same image is seen in such Bible passages as Psalm 52:8, 92:12; Isa. 44:4; Jer. 17:8; Ezek. 47:12.

Furthermore, the tree is said to be “planted” upon these waters. This refers to a permanent and enduring work of God. Psalm 128:3 applies the image to children. God has taken this man from his parched desert and planted him upon the irrigating waters of the Word of God. The idea of a transplanted shoot illustrates the idea of tender care on the part of the farmer (God).

The phrase “he brings forth his fruit in his season” means “to give” and is an expression of God’s grace. There is free and gracious giving by the man being described, and the expression “in his season” shows that he does not disappoint legitimate expectations.

His constancy is expressed in the words “his leaf also shall not wither.”

We are told that “whatsoever he does shall prosper.” The verb for “to prosper” is *tsalach*, which means “to carry through to a successful completion.” Note: what men regard as success has little to do with God’s view of success.

Verses 4 to 6, the ruin of the ungodly.

Verse 4 begins, “the ungodly are not so...” That is, they are not among those who have rejected men’s counsel, nor have they rejected the lifestyle of the world. They have not come to delight on God’s Word; they are not productive, constant, or successful.

The “ungodly” are pictures as “chaff which the wind drives away.” The image is taken from the

threshing floor, a flat, elevated piece of land where good winds prevailed. The grain was tossed into the air. The good grain fell to the ground, and the chaff was blown away by the wind. The ungodly are chaff, unstable and worthless.

The “Lord knows the way of the righteous”. He is not only cognizant of men’s attitude and behavior, He is omniscient and knows all things about all men at all times. God has a personal interest in the actions and affairs of all men, especially of His children, seen in Psalm 37:18; 44:22, 69:20; 94:11; 103:14, and 138:6.

But the ungodly will “perish”, that is, they will be permanently and eternally separated from God.