

Reading and Applying the Psalms Today

by

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The Book of Psalms is a much-loved part of Scripture. God's people in all ages have found comfort, instruction and challenge within its pages. Yet for all its familiarity we can always develop a better appreciation of this part of God's Word and improve our ability to understand and apply the Psalms as Christian Scripture, which, of course they are. For Christ himself told his disciples that the Psalms spoke of him (Lk. 24:44)

An Historical Context for the Book of Psalms

It can be significant for interpretation if we have in mind the original audience of a passage of Scripture. Considering those for whom a book was originally written can help us understand the thrust of the book as a whole. So, for instance, the book of Kings¹ was written for the exiles, as is apparent from the end of the book with its focus on King Jehoiachin in exile. Chronicles, on the other hand, was written for the returnees as the end of that book signals. So when we read of Solomon in either Kings or Chronicles we consider the significance of what is recorded about Solomon, not for those who lived at Solomon's time but for those of the exile, if the reference to Solomon is from Kings, or for those having returned, for the Chronicles' readers.

The Psalms come from a wide range of periods, probably from as early as Moses² through the exile³ and probably beyond.⁴ But the book as a whole was put together after the exile. This is the period that is best taken into account for the interpretation of psalms. This means that in this period the Psalter as a whole was formed, under the superintendence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as Scripture, as our Scripture. Hence it is instructive to

¹ I and II Kings are best considered as one work, the division into two being for convenience purposes and not part of the design of the original work. The same applies to I and II Chronicles.

² See Psalm 90, title: "A prayer of Moses the man of God."

³ See Psalm 137.

⁴ See Psalm 85. "Many believe that vv. 1-3 refer to the return from the exile...." (*The NIV Study Bible*, Kenneth Barker, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 868)

consider what messages the psalms were intending to convey, not so much to Moses', David's or the exiles' contemporaries, but for those for whom they were first a canonical book as we now have it.

Now we remember that the post-exilic period had a number of significant features. Israel was not a great nation among the nations. She was well past her glory days of David and Solomon. Israel was under foreign control until 167 BC and the period of the Maccabees. In post-exilic Israel there was no Davidic king ruling over the people. In such a context we see that there is an incongruity between the sentiments of many of the psalms and the situation and circumstances of God's people. This is especially true of those psalms that speak of the promises to David and of the exaltation of Zion, which will be considered in more detail below. Yet the point is that in this post-exilic context such psalms are to be seen as expressions of hope and desire – a hope and desire for that which was needed by God's people and that could only find satisfaction in the One who was to come and to whom the Book of Psalms pointed.

The Biblical Context of the Book of Psalms

To understand any part of the Bible it is useful to have an idea of the larger context within which it is set. There have been many proposals as to what the main theme of the Bible as a whole is – covenant, kingdom, promise. Whether or not one of these can be identified as central to the message of the Bible as a whole all of these certainly are major concerns of Scripture.

Considering the Bible for ourselves we might like to add another theme. If it is not the central theme it certainly is an all-pervasive one, and perhaps one that often is not given the prominence in our thinking that it should. Certainly it is a theme that is necessary to take into account if we are to understand well the message of the Bible in general and the messages of the psalms in particular. That is the theme of war.⁵

⁵ C.f. the comment by Russell D. Moore:

Catholic thinker Leon Podles is surely correct when he notes that the lack of emphasis on the cosmic warfare imagery of Scripture is one reason why much of both Catholic liturgy and Protestant revivalism has devolved into a saccharine sentimentality that tends to alienate men and rob worship of the gravity and awe that much of contemporary worship movement seek – and fail- to capture. (Russell D. Moore, “Leftward to Scofield: The Eclipse of the Kingdom in Post-conservative Evangelical Theology” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (Lynchburg, Virginia: Evangelical Theological Society), 47/3 (September 2004), p. 429.)

The Bible is about a war, and about many battles in that war. It is a war whose earthly manifestation started in the garden. It is a war in which the cosmos has been engaged and will be engaged until the One, whose name is the Word of God, returns on his white horse leading the armies of heaven in final victory.⁶

The psalmists were engaged in this war, affected by this war – and so are we. This is why the psalms are so relevant. It is true that this war and its battles are not always on the surface of every psalm. But so often they are. And whether on the surface or not we should not forget this war, which Yahweh was and is waging, is the context of all the psalms. So we must not fail to hear the question asked concerning the God of the psalms, nor its answer.

Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty,
The LORD mighty in battle. (Psa. 24:8)

Also, while the Psalmist can in confidence confess, “You prepare a table before me...”, this is no superficial trust and confidence, for it is “in the presence of my enemies.” (Psalm 23:5a) Similarly he can confess:

I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
I will not fear the tens of thousands
Drawn up against me on every side. (Psa. 3:5-6)

The Bible is about Yahweh’s war for reestablishment of his kingdom peace.

Yet here we must not fail to remember that it is *Yahweh’s* war. This reminds us that greater than the war is Yahweh’s kingship. He is the Great King over all. He directs the battles in the war and he directs all to its certain outcome. There is a war, but it is in Yahweh’s kingdom. There is a war, but Yahweh never loses control. Hence we might more accurately say the Bible is about the war of Yahweh, the Great King, for the reestablishment of his kingdom peace.

Who is he, this King of glory?

⁶ See Revelation 19:11-16.

The LORD Almighty⁷ –
He is the King of glory. (Psa. 24:10)

Hence, in our interpretation of the Psalms, we will be sensitive to their context, Yahweh's war, and to the character of the One on whom they focus, Yahweh as Great King.

The Shape of the Book of Psalms

It would be good if we could identify the thematic structure or shape of the book of Psalms. Then each psalm could be interpreted in its place in the literary development of the book as a whole. We do this, or should do this, when we interpret passages from other books. For example, we note that the promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 answers the need of the nations set out in the previous chapters. Then we observe that the rest of Genesis develops and clarifies that promise. We would be remiss in our interpretation of any particular passage if we did not take into account its place in the overall literary context of Genesis.

Yet it has not been easy to discover an overall thematic structure and development of the Psalter, though much work is being done in this area. The best we can do so far is to make some general comments about the structure of the Psalter and what the significance of these might be.

In the book of Psalms a general thematic movement can be discerned. There is a movement in tone from beginning to end, a movement from Lament or Complaint to Praise. This movement is not uniform or clear, but seem to be observable. In the first half of the Psalter there are just under 40 Complaint Psalms. These are Psalms that express sentiments like those of Psalm 3:1-2

O LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”⁸

Or the words of Psalm 4:1

⁷ Or “LORD of hosts” or “LORD of armies”, further reflecting the war theme.

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

Answer me when I call to you,
O my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
Be merciful to me and hear my prayer.

In the second half of the book there are around half this number.

On the other hand there are the more positive type of psalms – the descriptive and declarative praise psalms and the confidence psalms. Of these there are a little under 20 in the first half of the Psalter, but about twice that number in the second. These psalms express sentiments like the descriptive praise of Psalm 8:1

O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is your name in all the earth.

Or those of declarative praise or thanksgiving as in Psalm 118:1 and 5.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever....
In my anguish I cried to the Lord,
and he answered by setting me free.

Or expressing confidence as in Psalm 121:1-2.

I lift up my eyes to the hills –
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

And of course there is that great final crescendo of the *hallelujah* Psalms from 146 to 150.

So there appears to be a general thematic movement in the Psalter from complaint or lament to praise. Is this intentional and significant? Not too much can be claimed for this movement. Yet it is a reminder of the movement of God's plan of salvation from the fall to the new creation. Also the believer's life, with its ups and downs, still moves in this direction to its final destination – through the vale of tears to the final glory. This

general movement of the Psalter reminds us of this movement.⁹ So when interpreting the complaint psalms it is to be remembered that they are placed in a book that eventually ends with rejoicing in the LORD. They give an authentic but not the last word. On the other hand, when interpreting the “positive” psalms we should remember that they have been placed in a setting that recognizes pain, and though having moved from it does not deny it. Thus the general movement of the Psalter from complaint to praise points us to that time when “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...” (Revelation 21:4)

Yet, perhaps, more can be said about the shape of the Psalter than just observations on its general thematic movement. For instance, Psalms 1 and 2 act as an introduction to the book of Psalms as a whole, as Bruce Waltke points out.¹⁰ Psalm 1 stresses the themes of the contrast between the righteous and the wicked and to the ultimate destinations of both. This alerts the reader to look for these themes throughout the book of psalms, and they certainly are clearly there. Psalm 1 also presupposes the kingship of Yahweh. It is his torah on which the righteous man meditates and is so effective in such a person’s life. Also Yahweh is the one who determines destinies for “the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1:6) The Psalter as a whole cannot be understood correctly if this view of Yahweh as the Great King.

In Psalm 2 we are directed more explicitly to Yahweh’s overall kingship. He is the one who laughs at the insurrection of the nations (v. 4). He is the one installing his anointed on his holy hill (v. 6). He is the one who can and will give the nations to the anointed as his inheritance. (v. 8). This emphasis in Psalm 2 on the kingship of Yahweh only serves to reinforce the perspective of Psalm and that must be adopted to understand the Psalter correctly. Yahweh is the Great King. Further in Psalm 2 we are directed to Yahweh’s king, his anointed, his messiah, which is another significant theme of the Psalter, and which appears throughout the Psalter at significant junctures.

⁹ “A decided shift takes place as we move from the beginning of the book to its end. As we move towards the end, praise overtakes lament until at the very end we have a virtual fireworks of praise...In a real sense, the book of psalms moves us from mourning to joy.” (Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 45)

¹⁰ “Most agree that Ps 1-2 are its introduction...” (Bruce K. Waltke, “Psalms: Theology of” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, William A. VanGemeren, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 4:1110)

So at the beginning of the Psalter the reader is oriented to the foundational themes of the book as a whole – Yahweh as King, the righteous and the wicked and their destinies under his rule at the micro level, his appointed and anointed king, and ultimate and certain rectification of all rebellion in his kingdom at the macro level. These two psalms are tied together by the pronouncement of “blessedness” at the beginning of the first and the end of the second. Those who submit to his torah and his anointed king are the ones who are reckoned as “blessed”, as being in an enviable position (Psalm 1:1; 2:12). Who wouldn’t want to be one of these?

Similar themes are presented at the end of the Psalter in psalm 144 and 145. These two psalms may well be taken as the end of the Psalter¹¹ “proper”, with Psalm 146-150, as Waltke says, “its climactic finale of praise.” Psalms 146-150 are the grand doxology concluding Book V of the Psalter, just as the doxologies at the ends of Psalms 41, 72, 89 and 106 conclude the other four books. And in these two concluding psalms as see the same themes introduced at the beginning of the Psalter reiterated. Yahweh’s kingship is clear in psalm 145.

I will exalt you, my God and King;
I will praise you name for ever and ever....
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
And your dominion endures through all generations. (vv. 1, 13)

Verses 9-10 of Psalm 144 direct attention to Yahweh’s anointed king, for Yahweh is “the One who gives victories to kings, who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword.” Thus verses 1-8 of this psalm are seen to be a prayer by Yahweh’s king as is verse 11, and verses 12-14 are a picture of the desirable conditions of peace and prosperity that will accompany Yahweh’s deliverance of his anointed from all his enemies. So we note in these two psalms at the end of the Psalter, as in the two psalms with which the book commences, that those who are citizens of Yahweh’s kingdom, where his anointed rules unmolested are blessed, twice blessed, and that it is Yahweh’s kingship over all that determines ultimate destinies.

Blessed are the people of whom this is true;
blessed are those people whose God is the LORD. (Psa. 144:15; cf.
Pss. 1:1; 2:12)

¹¹ Waltke, “Psalms”, *NIDOTTE IV*:1110.

The LORD watches over all who love him,
But all the wicked he will destroy. (cf. Psa. 1:6)

So David M. Howard, Jr. can write:

That psalm 144 is a royal, Davidic psalm, immediately alongside Psalm 145, a Kingship of Yahweh psalm, signals that, at the end of the Psalter as at the beginning, the earthly and heavenly expressions of Yahweh's kingdom stand together as messages of hope for the Psalter's readers.¹²

So, having imbibed these triumphant themes of the Psalter, surely we feel compelled to exclaim with the writer of Psalm 145,

My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever. (v. 21)

And then respond with the *hallelujahs* of Psalms 146-150 concluding with the crescendo,

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD. (Psalm 150:6)

Responding to Variety in the Psalter.

Without doubt the Psalter consists of a variety of psalm types. To interpret and understand the psalms better attention can be given to this variety of types or genres, the different categories into which they might reasonably be grouped.¹³

1. Complaint Psalms¹⁴

¹² David M. Howard, Jr., "Recent Trends in Psalm Study" in *The Face of Old Testament Studies*, David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold, eds. (Grand Rapids; Baker Books, 1999), p. 337.

¹³ The presentation here depends to a large extent on Waltke's discussion in "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1100-1115.

¹⁴ The complaint psalms are often called lament psalms, but the term complaint psalms is better. Lament implies hopelessness, sorrow at the inevitable that cannot be changed. But these psalms are not hopeless, but rather complain so that things might be done about an intolerable situation.

We consider complaint psalms first because they are so numerous. In fact it can seem strange that the book of Psalms is named *Tehillim* or Praises since the complaint is so widespread in the book. Yet, because they are so numerous we need to come to grips with them to understand so much of the Psalter. Also complaint psalms have a range of elements, and we will use these to lead us into discussing other psalm types. As well it is edifying and challenging to have a good look at this type of psalm because they have features that can be quite foreign to us and hence we may learn from them important lessons about approaching God and relating to him.

Scholars have identified a number of elements of the Complaint Psalm – direct address to God, the complaint proper, a confession of sin or protestation of innocence, statements of confidence, petition, and praise.

a. Direct address to God:

In these psalms direct appeal is being made to Yahweh, the great King. “*O LORD, how many are my foes!*” (Psa. 3:1); “Answer me when I call to you, *O my righteous God.*” (4:1); “Listen to my cry for help, *my King and my God, for I to you I pray.*” (5:2); “*O LORD my God, I take refuge in you...*” (7:1). This is so obvious that it seems almost unnecessary to mention. Yet we can learn from this. As Waltke explains: “By turning to God in distress and addressing him the petitioner shows his complete dependence on God. To look elsewhere would be tantamount to idolatry.”¹⁵ So even in their deepest distress the psalmists turn to God and to him alone; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psa. 22:1); “O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.” (Psa. 88:1)

Now this attitude of complete dependence on God was to be characteristic of God’s people in all their lives, especially in their battling in the war.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. (Psa. 20:7)

Do not put your trust in princes,
In mortal men, who cannot save....
Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
Whose hope is in the LORD his God. (Psa. 146:3, 5)

¹⁵ Waltke, “Psalms”, *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1103.

This attitude of complete dependence on God, characteristic of the psalmists, was also characteristic of Jesus Christ in his battling (Heb. 5:7). It should also be ours. On whom do we reply in the war? If it is not on God, working by his Spirit, our battling is futile.

b. The Complaint.

There is a wide range of conditions that may be complained about in these psalms – sickness, false accusations, persecution, military crisis, drought, near death. This is an encouragement to us not to bottle up our concerns but rather bring them before God. Too often our attitude can be “Why pray when you can worry?” But not the psalmists. They brought their concerns to God. Their exhortation is:

Trust in him at all times, O people;
Pour out your hearts to him,
For God is our refuge.” (Psa. 62:8)

Now the most challenging complaints for us can be the psalmists’ complaints against God.

Why have *you* forsaken me? (Psa. 22:1)

You have fed (your people) with the bread of tears;
You have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors,
And our enemies mock us. (Psa. 80:5-6)

What is going on here? First, the psalmists are in the midst of the war. They are feeling the heat of the battle. They are seeking relief in the conflict.

Second, the psalmists know that the LORD, Yahweh, is in charge of all the circumstances in his kingdom – all the circumstances, pleasant and unpleasant. They believed in the sovereignty of God. Yahweh is the Great King.

But third, their belief in the sovereignty of God did not lead to passive acquiescence. They believed that, because God was sovereign, he could change the situation in his kingdom. So they were seeking to persuade their God, who is able to make things different, to do things for them, things that would be for their relief in the battle, in the war. So their complaint was a pouring out of their heart concerns, including concerns about what God

himself is doing, or seemingly failing to do. They knew God could act. Their concern was that he was not acting as they thought he should. And they “complained” accordingly.

Such complaining can be a great challenge to us. We may raise concerns about those who oppose us as God’s people, or about the affliction we are suffering. But to question God seems to us improper. Yet, in our inner beings, do not these thoughts arise from time to time? And when they do they are not to be denied. Rather they are to be brought to God, as the psalmists brought theirs. He is to be wrestled with in prayer. “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” (Luke 18:7-8a)

c. The Confession of Sin or Protestation of Innocence.

i. Confession of Sin

My guilt has overwhelmed me
like a burden too heavy to bear. (Psa. 38:4)

You know my folly, O God;
my guilt is not hidden from you. (Psa. 69:5)

How do such confessions of sin function in the complaint psalm? They are part of the psalmists making a case before the Great King. They are part of seeking to persuade God to act on the psalmists’ behalf. Sin is confessed and mercy is sought so that God might turn and be favourable to the petitioners. There is a desire to take away the cause of God’s negativity towards the petitioners.

It is useful to note the theology behind this aspect of the complaint type psalm. God’s disfavour, including the suffering that the petitioner wishes to have removed, may come as a result of sin. This theology is clear in Psalm 32.

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. (vv. 3-4)

The psalmist records how he suffered, and that physically. But he also acknowledges that this was something that came from the LORD's hand – “your hand was heavy upon me.”

Yet the psalmist continues.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD” –
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (v.5)

The solution to his problem is clear – confession of sin. This also reveals to us what was the cause of the suffering in the first place – unconfessed sin. Therefore sin can mar the relationship between God and his people, and it needs to be dealt with through confession so that God's favour might support in the war might be enjoyed again. This is the theology behind the confession of sin in the complaint psalms. It is operative not only at the individual but also at the communal level.

Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers;
may your mercy come quickly to meet us,
for we are in desperate need.
Help us, O God our Savior,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us and forgive our sins'
for your name's sake. (Psa. 79:8-9)

How often do we consider the suffering we endure is due to unconfessed sin, and so work at repentance? How much do we consider the ineffectiveness of our individual and corporate witness may be due to lack of confession of sin as we are engaged in the battle for the kingdom?

Now there can be a difficulty with this aspect of the complaint type psalm. Confession of our own sin is principally acceptable to us, even is we are poor at it in practice. But how are we to understand a confession of sin in a psalm that is applied to Christ, as is the case with Psalm 69?

Psalm 69 is clearly applied to Christ in the New Testament. After the account of Jesus cleansing the temple, John records: “His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”” Thus Christ's zeal is seen as being spoken of in Psalm 69:9. Also it Psalm

69 that states: “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst” (v. 21) reflected in the sufferings of Christ as recorded in all four gospels.¹⁶

The *NIV Study Bible*¹⁷ identifies Psalm 69 as ‘the prayer of a godly king’ and a “cry of a godly sufferer” – and, of course, Christ was the ultimate godly king and godly sufferer. But what are we to do with verse 5: “You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you”?

There seems to be an artificiality in saying that, when applied to Christ, the folly and guilt spoken of in Psalm 69 are the imputed folly and guilt of those for whom he died. This is theologically sound but is rather unconvincing. Rather the shadow reality model can explain the connection well. The psalmist king of Psalm 69 is the shadow. Christ the later and ultimate king is the reality that the former king foreshadowed. Naturally the shadow transcends the shadow, and transcends it significantly.

Usually in working from Old Testament to New we compare shadow with the later reality. Here the reality is not so much compared as contrasted. In the psalmist we have a less than ideal king prefiguring Christ. In Christ we have the ultimate and ideal king – at this point differing from his earlier counterpart – and so much better than he. So when reading Psalm 69 we can say of Christ that he fits the overall pattern of the king over God’s people – and in some areas presented here, he is so much better.

ii. Protestation of innocence.

The flip side of confessions of guilt are protestations of innocence. These are also part of making a case before God, seeking to persuade him to respond to the petitioner’s complaint.

Vindicate me, O LORD,
for I have led a blameless life;
I have trusted in the LORD
without wavering.
Test me, O LORD, and try me,
examine my heart and mind;
for your love is ever before me,
and I walk continually in your truth.
I do not sit with deceitful men,

¹⁶ Matt. 27:34, 48; Mk 15:23, 36; Lk 23:36; Jn 19:29.

¹⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 848.

nor do I consort with hypocrites;
I abhor the assembly of evildoers
and refuse to sit with the wicked.
I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, O LORD,
proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.
I love the house where you live, O LORD,
the place where your glory dwells. (Psa. 26:1-8)

Clearly this is a protestation of innocence in which the psalmist speaks of his complete loyalty to Yahweh. Such protestations of innocence, though not frequent, occur in other complaint psalms.¹⁸

Such claims to innocence are challenging to us because they give us the reverse problem of the confession of sin. We can readily understand how a protestation of innocence could apply to Christ, but how could anyone other than Christ make such claims. How could these psalms have been used by God's people or how can they still, either the words themselves or as models for prayer?

The focus in these protestations of innocence is on sanctification and its reality and necessity in God's people. Behind these assertions are the model of Psalm 1 and the person portrayed there, who would be "like a tree planted by streams of water...For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous...." (vv. 3, 6) Also Psalm 15 presents the same theology that harmony with God and acceptance by him is for those whose lives reflect righteous behaviour.

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?
Who may live on your holy hill?
He whose walk is blameless
And who does what is righteous.... (vv. 1-2)

So also Psalm 24:

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?
Who may stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol

¹⁸ Cf. Pss. 7:3-5, 8; 17:1-5; 44:17-18, 20-21.

or swear by what us false. (vv. 3-4)

We must not forget that this need for sanctification is a New Testament as well as an Old Testament emphasis. Those who belong to Christ have been saved from the power of sin, for “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Therefore, as Paul exhorts the Roman church, “if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live...” (Rms 8:13). All this is not sinless perfection, much less salvation by works righteousness. But neither is it easy-believism nor antinomianism, for “without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14) The protestations of innocence in the Psalms then operate in the area of sanctification.

The focus of these protestations of innocence also is innocence before the court. So the Psalmist is *relatively* innocent. He does not deserve to be treated like an unbeliever when he is not living like the wicked who oppose him, like an unbeliever. So in Psalm 26:

Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
my life with bloodthirsty men,
in whose hands are wicked schemes,
whose right hands are full of bribes.
But I lead a blameless life;
redeem me and be merciful to me. (vv. 9-11)

Here are words that challenge us. Could we pray this way? It is not our practice. Is this because we are not persecuted enough to feel the need to pray for vindication? Is it because we are not really aware of the war? Or is it just that we have not meditated on psalms like these and thought through their implications for our lives as soldiers of the King?

d. Statements of Confidence

The lament or complaint psalms also contain words of confidence. With these we feel much more at home, at least at first. Words like these are familiar:

But you are a shield around me, O LORD;
you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. (Psa. 33:3)

Or:

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed. (Psa. 22:3-5)

And again:

I will sing of the LORD's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all
generations.
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself. (Psa. 89:1-2,
cf. vv. 3-37)

Statements of confidence such as these focus on God's power, but also point to the fact that he is gracious and compassionate, patient and abounding in love and faithfulness (cf. Exo. 34:6). Certainly these are important matters to focus on.

Yet it is instructive to ask the question, How do these statements of confidence function in the context of the complaint psalms within which they are found. Waltke claims: "The confidence section... turns the mood from dark despair to bright hope in preparation for the petition that follows."¹⁹

Now this is true for some of the psalms. So after the statement of confidence in Psalm 3 we read:

To the LORD I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill. *Selah*

I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
I will not fear the tens of thousands
drawn up against me on every side. (vv. 4-6)

¹⁹ Waltke, "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1104.

There is a movement within the psalm from disorientation to reorientation. So the statement of confidence may well be seen as a section that “turns the mood from dark despair to bright hope....” Yet the confidence section of these psalms does not always function this way. Rather the psalmist’s assertion of confidence is actually part of his appeal as he feels the heat of battle. It is part of a case being argued, and argued passionately. In summary the psalmists present their case this way: “All these positive things I am confessing are true of you God. This is how you act. This is your character. Now show it on my behalf.” It is as if the psalmist is urging that the honour of the Great King, his reputation, just outlined in the statement of confidence, is at stake. In fact for God not to respond to his plea would be inconsistent with his character.

As an example of the function of the statements of confidence note the wrestlings of Psalm 22. There are words of confidence in the LORD’s character, as demonstrated in the history of his covenant people:

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not disappointed. (vv. 3-5)
There are words of confidence in a past relationship that the psalmist himself has had with the LORD:

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother’s breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother’s womb you have been my God. (vv. 9-10)

But then there are the desperate pleas:

Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me.
Deliver my life from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.

Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen. (vv. 11, 19-21)

The statements of confidence “put the pressure on” the Great King to act powerfully for the petitioner. We see the same relationship of confidence to plea in Psalm 44. There are strong words of confidence in the LORD.

You are my King and my God,
who decrees victories for Jacob.
Through you we push back our enemies;
through your name we trample our foes.
I do not trust in my bow,
my sword does not bring me victory;
but you give us victory over our enemies,
you put our adversaries to shame.
In God we make our boast all day long,
and we will praise your name forever. (vv. 4-8)

But again there is no movement from dark despair to bright hope. Rather there follows a complaint that the LORD has let his people down.

But now you have rejected and humbled us;
you no longer go out with our armies.
You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.
You sold your people for a pittance,
gaining nothing from their sale. (vv. 9-12)

After ongoing complaint and assertions of innocence eventually the pleas.

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever....
Rise up and help us;
redeem us because of your unfailing love. (vv. 23, 26)

And so the psalm ends. Here there is no moving from dark despair to bright hope. Rather the psalmist is making a case, putting the pressure on the Great King – in desperation. The statements of confidence are articulated, not for self-assurance nor in a change of mood, but to seek to persuade the Almighty to respond in the complainants’ favour.

When we see complaint, especially complaint against God himself, assertions of innocence and statements of confidence put together this way what do we have? We have boldness in prayer. This is the boldness of filling the mouth with arguments to state one's case (cf. Job 23:4). This is not merely asking, but seeking and knocking (cf. Mat. 7:7-8). It the pleading of the importunate widow (Lk. 18:1-8), the petitioning of the watchmen divinely charged: "You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth." (Isa. 62:6b-7) Do we not need to learn the practice of bold prayer in the war of the ages? The Psalms can teach us such.

It should be noted here that there are a group of psalms that are entirely confidence. Some scholars consider that they may have been a spin-off from the confidence sections of the lament psalms. These include such psalms as 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 121, 125, 131. In them we find well known and encouraging words of the Shepherd's Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. (Psa. 23:1-3)

Or of the Traveler's Psalms:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore. (Psa. 121:1-2, 7-8)

Longman reminds us: "These psalms contain striking metaphors which show intimate awareness of God's presence on the part of the psalmist. God is the psalmist's refuge (11:1; 16:1), shepherd (23:1), light (27:1), rock (62:2) and help (121:2)."²⁰ Yet we also note the confidence of the psalmists

²⁰ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, p. 31.

is expressed not in the comfort of the living room but in the very face of danger (cf. Psa. 11:2-3; 23:5). This is real trust. Hence it is good for us to remember that it one thing to sing such psalms. It is quite another to sing them in the face of the enemy – and mean them.

e. The Petition

Waltke reminds us: “The *petition section* typically consists of an appeal for God to be favourable toward the psalmist, to deliver (Heb. $\psi H\omega$) him, and/or to punish his enemies.”²¹

i. Asking for deliverance

In our spiritual warfare we should have little difficulty in principle with asking for God’s deliverance. It is consistent with the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil” or “from the evil one.” (Mat. 6:13) On the other hand we may have things to learn, again, in the area of boldness of appeal.

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. (Psa. 44:23)

Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually. (Psal. 74:22-23)

ii. Asking God to punish

Such petitions for the punishment of enemies occur often in the lament or complaint psalms. According to Waltke they appear in 35 of the psalms. Examples are well known, if usually avoided. For example:

Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually. (Psa. 74:22-23)

²¹ Waltke, “Psalms”, *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1106.

Words like these do raise difficulties. Many have questioned how they are to be understood and whether they can be models for our praying today. Suffice it say at this point that it is clear that there is something of this tone in the New Testament as well (Lk. 18:7-8; 2 Ths.1:6-10; Rev. 6:11). Such prayers, shocking as they may seem to us, at least remind us of the seriousness of the war of the ages in which God's people are still engaged. Their thrust is in line with the petition: "Your kingdom come." (Mat. 6:10)²²

f. Praise

The lament or complaint psalms often contain a section of praise. Waltke states: "Petition Psalms end in praise...."²³

i. Complaint Psalms may not end in praise.

We should not think that by the end of every complaint psalm everything is wrapped up and all is back to normal. Rather a significant number of these psalms end with a plea. At the end of the psalm the psalmist is still waiting for the LORD to respond.

O LORD, do not forsake me;
be not far from me, O my God.
Come quickly to help me,
O Lord my Savior. (Psa. 38:21-22)

Look away from me, that I may rejoice again
before I depart and am no more. (Psa. 39:13)

Rise up, O God, and defend your cause;
remember how fools mock you all day long.
Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries,
the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually. (Psa. 74:22-23)

Therefore, by way of application, we should not think that every plea of the believer will bring immediate relief. It didn't for Paul (2 Cor. 12:8). It didn't for Christ in the garden. It didn't for God's people who expressed

²² For a more extended discussion see my article, "God's Servants Suffering in the Psalms" in *Vox Reformata* 67 (2002), pp. 2-23, especially pp. 19-22.

²³ Waltke, "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1107.

their thoughts in the psalms. And it may not for us. We may rise from prayer still looking for God to act on our behalf – and regularly go back to prayer until he does.

ii. Complaint Psalms often end in praise.

Though a number of the complaint psalms do not end in praise the majority do.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me. (Psa. 135-6)

What brings about the change of mood? In some cases the change is so dramatic that it appears that in some way the petitioner has received an answer or the assurance of an answer right there. This is particularly noticeable in Psalm 22. The psalm has been nothing but complaint and petition backed by statements of confidence climaxing inverse 21:

Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen.

Then suddenly there is a dramatic change of mood in verse 22.

I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the congregation I will praise you.
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or disdained
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help. (vv. 22-24)

Here is a vow to praise the LORD publicly, followed by a call to others to praise and worship. Then the grounds are given in verse 24. The prayer has been heard and responded to. So the psalm has moved from complaint and petition to praise.

Some have thought that the petitioner, being in the temple, has received a word of assurance from a priest or prophet.²⁴ Though this may have been the case at times it is hard to imagine that this was always so. In some cases the answer may lie in the psalmist's meditation on the LORD himself and his purposes (cf. Psalms 73:16-28; 77:10-12²⁵). In other cases it may be that the psalm telescopes events of a period of some time and is more like a poetic account of a longer process, now completed with the answer obtained. The recollection in itself, as well in its concluding thoughts, becomes an act of praise for complaint answered.

iii. Praise differing from thanks.

In connection with the praise sections of the complaint psalms it is challenging and instructive to consider how praise differs from thanks. Westermann notes:

In praise the one being praised is elevated...; in thanks the one being thanked remains in his place.... In praise I am directed entirely towards the one whom I praise.... In thanks I am expressing *my* thanks.... The most important verbal mark of difference occurs in the speaking of the words "thank you"...; genuine, spontaneous praise occurs in a sentence in which the one being praised is the subject: "thou has(t) done," or "thou art...."²⁶

Now these distinctions are not watertight, but they do capture some very important aspects of relating to God. Psalm 30 is a response to prayer answered, often called a Thanksgiving psalm.²⁷ But it not the "thank you" thanksgiving that may well characterize our responses. It is true that there are in this psalm a number of "I" type praise statements, but even these do not leave the focus on the speaker:

I will exalt you, O LORD... (v. 1)

O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever. (v. 12)

²⁴ Some grounds for this possibility can be found in the account of Eli's response to Hannah's praying at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9-18).

²⁵ Though it should be noted that the meditation here did not fully solve the dilemma of the psalmist.

²⁶ C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (1981), pp. 27-28, quoted in Waltke, "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1107.

²⁷ See Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, pp. 30-31.

On the other hand the psalm is filled with “you did” praise statements. “...you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me....you healed me.... O LORD, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit.... O LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed....You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, (vv. 1-3, 7, 11)

This is the sort of language that exalts God. This is language that is so far above a cursory “thank you.” This is acknowledgement of God’s active involvement in one’s life in the midst of the war – for good. This is the response that those who had their prayers answered should emulate, recounting what he has done in some detail. It does not inform God, but it does glorify and without doubt please him.

This praise element of the lament or complaint psalms leads us to the praise psalms.

2. Praise Psalms

Two main types of praise psalms have been identified – declarative praise psalms and descriptive praise psalms.

a. Declarative Praise Psalms

As indicated above, these have been termed “thanksgiving psalms”. They have also been called Todah psalms, after the Hebrew word often translated “thanksgiving” or “praise”. These psalms are praise responses to the LORD’s deliverance, to the LORD’s answer to a complaint or petition. They are contrasted with descriptive praise psalms, or hymns, which will be considered below.

These psalms have certain elements. They can include:

- i. A commitment to praise the LORD:

I will exalt you, O LORD....

O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever. (Psa. 30:1a, 12b)

I will extol the LORD at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips.

My soul will boast in the LORD.... (Psa. 34:1-2a)

ii. An account of the experience of deliverance.

This can be either in the second person, addressing God himself, or in the third person, addressing the congregation. As Longman points out, “The thanksgiving is most easily identified by a *restatement of the lament* which is now answered....”²⁸

...you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
O LORD my God, I called to you for help
and you healed me.
O LORD, you brought me up from the grave;
you spared me from going down into the pit. (Psa. 30:1b-3)

I sought the LORD, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears...
This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles. (Psa. 34:4, 6)

Come and listen, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.
I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.
If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
but God has surely listened
and heard my voice in prayer. (Psa. 66:16-18)

iii. A call to others to praise the LORD.

Sing to the LORD, you saints of his;
praise his holy name. (Psa. 30:4)

Glorify the LORD with me;
let us exalt his name together. (Psa. 34:3)

This type of praise can be a challenge, even a rebuke, to us. When we are in deep need we can pray so zealously and perseveringly. Yet when God answers we can so quickly move on. The psalmists on the other hand are

²⁸ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, p. 31.

equally zealous and expansive in their response of praise for God's answers to their petitions. We note also how the psalmists tell others of what the LORD has done for them and even call their fellows to praise God with them, which we can shy away from for fear of drawing too much attention to ourselves or of being thought of as spiritual show-offs. Yet how well this fits with Paul's instruction "Rejoice with those who rejoice...." (Rms 12:15).

b. Descriptive Praise Psalms or Hymns.

These psalms "celebrate God's person and his works in general, not a specific act of deliverance in answer to a petition."²⁹ In this way they are distinguished from the declarative praise psalms.

In the descriptive praise psalms reasons that are given for praising God include:

- i. That God created or redeemed Israel.

Know that the LORD is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. (Psa. 100:3)

Though they are unworthy they were made his people just the same.

- ii. That God created the world and sustains it.

Praise the LORD, O my soul....

He set the earth on its foundations;

it can never be moved. (Psa. 104:1a, 5)

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for he commanded and they were created.

He set them in place for ever and ever;

he gave a decree that will never pass away. (Psa. 148:5-6)

Though the world is marred by sin (as the psalmists well recognized, cf. Psa. 104:35), there is no despising of the creation nor flight from the world. Rather God's creation remains a marvel and beneficial because the LORD uphold and sustains it.

²⁹ Waltke, "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1107.

iii. That God, as the covenant God, rules history.

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do. (Psa. 33:12-15)

Because it is the God who is in covenant with them who rules history, “Israel is safe and secure under God’s protective rule.”³⁰ Behind the LORD’s creating and redeeming activity lies his *ξεσεδ*, his active loving kindness in covenant relationship, and it this which is celebrated repeatedly in the refrain of Psalm 136, “his love endures forever” as well as in many other psalms.³¹

In this category of the descriptive praise psalms or hymns Longman includes Zion songs. These are psalms “which extol Mt. Zion, not because of any greatness on its part..., but because God has caused his presence to dwell there in a special sense in the temple.”³² These include such songs as Psalm 48:

Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise,
in the city of our God, his holy mountain.
It is beautiful in its loftiness,
the joy of the whole earth.
Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion,
the city of the Great King.
God is in her citadels;
he has shown himself to be her fortress. (vv. 1-3)³³

A question for us is: What are we today to make of such references? What is the present application of the words of the Zion Psalms? Some would apply them to the present city of Jerusalem, especially the injunction of

³⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 810.

³¹ E.g. Psalm 117:2; 100:5; 118:1-4, 29; 103:8.

³² Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, pp. 25-26.

³³ So also Pss. 46, 76, 84, 87, 122, though Zion is mentioned in other psalms.

Psa. 122:1: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” Now while it is true that we should pray for the peace of the present city of Jerusalem, as we should pray for peace everywhere, we are on safer ground for the specific application of the Zion references in the psalms if we take our cue from the New Testament. For here the attention of Christians is directed to Zion, but it is the ultimate Zion, of which the Old Testament Zion of the psalms was a foreshadowing. This Zion is “the Jerusalem that is above” (Gal. 4:26), “the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22). This ultimate Zion has its representation here on earth in the church of Jesus Christ, which consists of the citizens of that heavenly Jerusalem (Phi. 3:20; Eph. 2:11-22). So Zion psalms now speak of God’s dwelling in heaven and amongst his people on earth.

Similarly we no longer have an interest in nor concern for a physical temple, when we sing of the temple in the psalms. Rather our interest is in that to which the physical temple pointed – first, Jesus Christ (Jn 2:18-22) and then his people, who have been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone”, as a “holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph. 2:20-21; cf. 1Cor. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:5). So the temple of the Psalms still points to God’s dwelling place, but now in the hearts and lives of his people on earth. Hence when we sing of going to the house of God it is not referring to any physical church building. Rather we sing about going to meet with God as he dwells amongst his gathered people, wherever that may be, whether in a building or not. And when Christians sing of the security of Zion, in the Zion psalms, they remember Christ’s promise: “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Mat. 16:18) Singing of the beauties of Zion we rightly focus on the Jerusalem above which is being prepared as a bride for her husband (Rev. 21:2).

3. Kingship or Royal Psalms

Kingship or royal psalms are “oracles, prayers and praises for, concerning or by the king.”³⁴ Their common feature is mention of the king and hence they are not necessarily connected to the complaint type of psalm.³⁵ They obviously include psalms such well-known psalms as 2, 45, 72, 110, as

³⁴ John H. Stek, *Aspects of Old Testament Poetics...The Writings: A Syllabus* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 66

³⁵ On the other hand a kingship psalm may also be a lament psalms, e.g. Psalm 89.

well as others such as 20, 21, 89, 101, 132 and 144.³⁶ These psalms form a grouping that applies very obviously to Christ, our messianic king, even if they were penned originally with an Israelite king in mind. Properly we may apply them to Christ for a number of reasons:

- a. They speak of the legitimate kings over God's people who were Davidic kings – and Jesus was the ultimate son of David.
- b. The Davidic covenant was behind these psalms. This is explicit in Psalm 89.

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'" (vv. 3-4)

The Davidic covenant has its ultimate referent as Jesus Christ.

- c. These psalms received their canonical context in the post-exilic period.

At that time there was no king over God's people. Therefore as they stand as Scripture the kinship psalms express, intentionally, the belief that there was a messianic king to come. Waltke says: "Messianism originated not in the intertestamental period of later Judaism but in the kingly ideal of ancient Israel, as expressed in the royal psalms."³⁷ This truth of the messianic nature of the kingship psalms is reinforced by their canonical post-exilic context. Jesus Christ is that messiah of whom they spoke.

So it can be seen that the kingship or royal psalms clearly point to Christ. Now some of these psalms are more easily related to Christ than others, especially those used this way in the New Testament, as are Psalms 2 and 110. Some are less easily applied, such as Psalm 101, though we are helped by an interpretative focus that understands the psalms as "[a] king's pledge to reign righteously.... Only Christ, the great Son of David, has perfectly fulfilled these commitments."³⁸ Because kingship psalms occur within the

³⁶ If the psalm titles are taken as authentic, obviously the number of kingship psalms increases.

³⁷ Waltke, "Psalms", *NIDOTTE*, IV: 1111.

³⁸ *NIV Study Bible*, p. 884

Psalter framework with Psalm 2 at the beginning and Psalm 144 at the end, we are reminded that Yahweh's Messiah is very significant in the Book of Psalms, as well as in Yahweh's dealing with his people and world. When we sing the kingship psalms we sing of Christ and to him.

4. Wisdom Psalms

Finally there are the wisdom psalms. These also do not appear to be thematically linked to the complaint type psalms as so many of the other psalms types can be. The nature of biblical wisdom literature is seen in the wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. "They reveal God's will in the nitty-gritty and difficult areas of our lives."³⁹ The wisdom psalms in many ways reflect the same themes as the wisdom books. So we have wisdom psalms which contrast two ways of life, that of the righteous and that of the wicked, in a way similar to much of Proverbs.

Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers....
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psa. 1:1, 6; cf. Psalm 37)

There is also the contemplation on the wonder of God's law (cf. Ecc. 12:13-14).

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple. (Psa. 19:7; cf. Psalm 119)

The wisdom psalms can wrestle, Job-like, with the seeming inconsistencies of living in God's world.

Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant

³⁹ Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, p. 33.

when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Psa. 73:1-3; cf. Psalm 49 for a response.)

Again, in a way seen also in Proverbs,⁴⁰ the wisdom psalms can rejoice in the order of proper relationships, whether in the family or in the wider covenant community.

Blessed are all who fear the LORD,
who walk in his ways.
You will eat the fruit of your labor;
blessings and prosperity will be yours.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your sons will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD. (Psa. 128:1-4; cf. 127:3-5)

How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity! (Psa. 133:1)

The point of wisdom literature and wisdom psalms is that there is order in world over which God is the Great King. There regularities by which things operate as ordered by him, and this is how it is meant to be. So his people can celebrate and encourage each other with this truth. Yet biblical wisdom also recognizes that there are tensions, not least of all because the war of the ages still rages. Therefore order is not always apparent, as Psalm 73 reminds us. So such wisdom psalms too, like the Psalter as a whole, point us to Jesus Christ, as they press us to pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” (Rev. 22:20)

Conclusion:

The book of Psalms contains a wealth of edifying material. We should seek to grow in our understanding and the relevant application of them. To this end the big picture context of the war in which the Psalmists, as God’s people, were engaged should be taken into account. This was the war for the advancement of the LORD’s kingdom – a war in which believers today are still engaged. As well, an understanding of the Psalms is enhanced by proper attention being given to the wide range of topics and forms they

⁴⁰ Also the Song of Solomon on a more intimate level.

exhibit and to what the significance of these is. Furthermore, because the Psalms are, in the main, personal communications of godly people of covenant faith, we have much to learn from them as models and vehicles for our own communications both to God and to our contemporary covenant community. Finally, as the Psalms, read in their canonical context, pulsate with hope and expectation of God's kingdom future for his people, they are to be read and an appropriated with an eye to Christ, the messianic king, the centre of all Scripture.