

Lesson 23: Unit 3 summary

In reviewing this unit on the Psalms let's take a look at some Psalms with unique structures. These stand out from the others for something unusual in how they were constructed. For example, Psalm 119, the one about God's law, is an extended acrostic poem.

The Psalm is divided into 22 sections of eight verses each. Each of the verses in each section starts with a particular letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus the Psalm has 176 verses. Obviously the acrostic nature of the Psalm doesn't translate into a different language, but knowing that helps us understand the restrictions the author put in place before doing the writing.

Another acrostic Psalm is found in chapters nine and ten. In the Septuagint (the Old Testament in Greek translated by Jews at Alexandria in Egypt before the time of Christ) these are a single Psalm. Some Bible versions honor that and divide up a different Psalm so there will be 150. In those Bibles the Shepherd Psalm is 22, not 23.

Psalm 78 is an interesting, though not entirely chronological, account of the history of Israel from bondage in Egypt to the kingship of David. Another recounting of history is found in adjoining Psalms 105 and 106.

Then there's Psalm 107. It describes people in various troublesome situations. After the description of each situation there's a verse like this:

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress. (Psalm 107:6)

The rest of the section tells what God did to deliver or save them.

The 176 verses of Psalm 119 make it the longest Psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible. But the shortest Psalm is just two places before it. Psalm 117 has only two verses. It is composed of two Hebrew couplets and the phrase "Hallelu Yah." (Praise the LORD)

Psalm 136 is unique in that the words "His love endures forever," appear after every line.

The theme of the Psalms is that God is trustworthy. All the calls to praise him are based on "his wonderful works." God does great things, and it is our privilege to say so. Along with that is the assumption that God's works are good, that is they will help rather than harm us.

Two Psalms in particular are noted for their expressions of trust.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,

the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46:1-6)

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."
Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will take refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked. (Psalm 91:1-8)

As in other places we see the Psalmist mention God's power as being used to punish the wicked. We have to remember the level of understanding available to them at that time in earth's history. The main point is that they see God's power as a protection for themselves, a protection not always afforded those who choose to ignore God or who choose to serve themselves rather than others.

Further study:

1. Read the rest of each of the Psalms quoted above. Do the additional verses change the overall message of the Psalm?
2. Perhaps you've noticed a theme in the Psalms that we didn't cover in these lessons. How would you approach teaching that theme to others. List the Psalms you would quote to establish the theme.
3. God's law as a theme in the Psalms is something we didn't directly address in these lessons, other than to mention Psalm 119. How do the Psalmists relate to the law? Why do you think that is? Do they see the law as a list of rules or as an expression of eternal principles?