The Psalms

(Notes for the discussion leader are set apart in italics. Use the separate handout version for discussion participants.)

Since the Psalms is a collection of poetry, I thought I would introduce this evening's discussion by reading a poem. This poem is by award-winning 20th-century English poet Ruth Pitter, who was a friend of C. S. Lewis, who admired her work.[1]

Sinking, by Ruth Pitter

O I am spent, I have no more strength to swim.
The blessed sun touches the bitter sea's rim:
I cannot see the headland or the little town,
All my limbs are weary, and I must go down.

O is it sleep or love or death I most need,
And what peace shall I find in the arms of the weed?
The gulf-weed shall take me and cradle me in brown
Wide-waving tresses, for I must go down.

Go down under the sweet, the bitter flow:
You are the blind, but the blessed spirits know
Whether in sleep, or love, or death you must drown;
Cease then your striving, sink and go down.

Q: What idea is this poem expressing? What is gained or lost by expressing this idea poetically? (One might also compare the song of Moses in Ex 15 and the prose description of the same events in the previous chapter.

Background

- The latest psalm was written almost 2,500 years ago, and the earliest prob. 3,500 years ago, the oldest being by Moses (90) and the most recent written after the exile (137).

That would be like someone in A.D. 5500 reading something written today; they were written in the time of temple sacrifice

- The psalms are cited directly 116 times in the NT, more than any other book of the NT.

[1] Fun fact: *He admired her enough to say that if he were the type to marry she'd be the type of woman he'd want to marry. (Wikipedia)*

And the NT reads the Pss differently than we do. We read Pss like a prayer book, or a song book, and this is important, since it gives us powerful insight into a healthy relationship with God. But it is also true that we needn't stop at this way of interpreting the Pss; the NT doesn't

- The psalms is the oldest commentary on the Pentateuch

So, e.g., Ps 51 presents an understanding of the Law: that while David surely offered sacrifices for his sins, God really desires not sacrifices, but a broken heart

- The psalms also give us important new information about the covenant with David

In the Pss we learn that it isn't just that David's line will rule forever, but that this will be through a single person; the Messiah will be a conquering and ruling king (110 and 2); he will be rejected (118) and betrayed (69 and 109); he'll die and be resurrected (22 and 16); he'll be ultimately triumphant (68 and 72)

- Psalms combine generality and specificity

So we are told Ps 54 is occasioned by Saul's hunting for David, but the psalm itself doesn't say, "Save me from Saul, O God, by your name", but "Save me, O God, by your name" (54:1).

- The psalms have five books with a concluding doxology, and there are differences between the books—book 1-3 probably being written earlier; the first having most of the Davidic psalms; differing preferences in the use of Yahweh v. Elohim when naming God; the mood moving generally from lament to praise throughout

Hebrew poetry

- Hebrew poetry is characterized not by rhyme or meter but by *terse phrases*, *imagery*, and *parallel structure*; Hebrew poetry uses parallelism to "rhymes" ideas

- Parallelism builds power; parallelism is memorable. "*<u>We cannot</u> dedicate, <u>we cannot</u> consecrate, <u>we cannot</u> hallow these grounds…*"

The semantic distance between these verbs is small, but each phrase builds on the last for a larger effect. An even more powerful example is the passage from Martin Luther King's Dream speech:

*There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "**When will you be satisfied**?" **We can never be satisfied** as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. **We can never be satisfied** as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. **We cannot be satisfied** as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. **We can never be satisfied** as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: "For Whites Only." **We cannot be satisfied** as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, **we are not satisfied**, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."*

- Not all parallelism functions the same (synonymous; antithetic; synthetic; etc.)

Until 1750, Christian and Jewish interpreters believed almost universally that parallel phrases must be saying something independent, since God and the writer would not bother to repeat an idea. After 1750 it was believed that they must be saying the same thing, for emphasis. Now it is recognized that the real usage can lie anywhere in between these limits

- Chiastic parallelism uses inversion, as in **ABC…C'B'A'**: "*Ask not what your **country** can do for **you**—ask what **you** can do for your **country**.*" (See Psalm 2.)

Q: Chiastic parallelism can point to key ideas. What idea does it point to in the chiastic Psalm 2? The entire psalm is a chiasm. In Ps 2 the content is not a slave to the structure, but it's present enough to allow the psalm to build to the climactic central verse, 6, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

- There are various types of psalms: hymns of praise (e.g. 103), laments (51), thanksgiving psalms (36), psalms of confidence (91), royal psalms (47), wisdom psalms (119) and imprecatory psalms (137)

- Psalms were used personally and corporately; Psalms 120-134 were used during Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

How to read the Psalms

- The Psalms are in the written in the context of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants with God, both of which were vassal-suzerain—a treaty of a lesser nation with a greater king (93:1-2; 47:1-5)

"…God is holy, and we are sinners. Sinful people can't enter into a relationship with a holy God." [L56] The idea here is that a vassal can't simply enter into a treaty without addressing outstanding issues affecting the relationship.

- The covenant implies a close connection, and not merely a mystical one: the psalmists spoke to a God who acted in concrete ways in history, and not just in the distant past

- You should ask of the Psalms: How does the psalm fit its title and implied context? Is this psalm used in the NT at all? Does this psalm reflect an Old-Covenant theology? How does the psalmist use parallel structure and imagery? How might the psalm be applied to Jesus, either as God or as Messiah? What are the dominant emotions in this psalm? What type of psalm is this?

- Since they were used in temple worship, entering into the Psalms can be like entering into the sanctuary and into God's presence. On a more personal level, the Psalms allow us to enter into the devotional life of the Psalmist.

Q: When you read the psalms devotionally, how do you read them? Do you read them differently from other passages of Scripture?

I'd like to play a clip from a lecture by Lee Campbell (of Xenos Church in Columbus, Ohio) on the Psalms. Q: Campbell points out that we can foster our love for God by deliberately dwelling on it, as in our use of the Psalms of praise. Have you found this to be true?

However, we are not always in the same mood as the psalmist. So Bonhoeffer writes:

> We must ask how we can understand the Psalms as God's Word, and then we shall be able to pray them. It does not depend, therefore, on whether the Psalms express adequately that which we feel at a given moment in our heart. If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. If we were dependent entirely on ourselves, we would probably pray only the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. But God wants it otherwise. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.
>
> –Bonhoeffer

Q: What do you do on a day when you read a psalm and the psalmist is at a very different place from you?

The Psalms tell us both of the psalmist's joy in God (and his law) as well as God's love and delight in us. I'd like to play two clips by Christian speaker Ajith Fernando, on the subject of the role joy plays in the life of the Christian.

One of the psalms which mentions God's delight in the psalmist is Psalm 35. Let's finish tonight's discussion by looking in-depth at this Psalm.

Q: Read Psalm 35, which mentions God's delight in the Psalmist. What role does delight play in this Psalm? What role does it play in the life of the psalmist, or the community who reads the psalm together?

Q: The Anglican BCP from 1549 includes the prayer, "Give us peace in our time, O Lord, because there is none other that fightest for us, but only thou, O God." How was God fighting for the psalmist? How does God fight for you? (See also Neh 4:19; Zech 14:3.) How do we read "imprecatory" Psalms (psalms which direct curses toward others) in light of Romans 12:14 ("Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them"), Mt 5:44, etc.? Is it wrong for the Psalmist to pray for justice?

Q: How does John 15:25 make use of Ps 35:19b? Is John mapping the messianic *pattern* of David's life onto Jesus? Does this reading of Ps 35 make it inevitable that Jesus experience rejection by his own people?

I collected a list of favorite Psalms from friends and from members of the Holy Huddle:

Favorite Psalms (# "votes"): 23 (6), 27, 91, 104, 121 (4), 19, 42, 46, 103, 139 (3), 8, 84, 137, 145, 147, 148, 150 (2)

Fun Fact: Prior to 1750, both Jews and Christians read parallel phases in the psalms as if they presented distinct ideas. After all, why would the author repeat himself or herself? After 1750 an influential interpreter convinced everyone to read them completely synonymously. Commentators now allow a much greater range between these extremes. (Longman, 97)