

I. Introduction

When I ride the subway in Cambridge from time to time, I love to pay attention to the subway ads. Being in an area that is flooded with research universities and major hospitals, there are usually ads for clinical studies or experiments in need of human subjects. For example, here is an ad that I found online for a clinical study at Mass General. They're testing the effects of LEDs on brain function. So, if you're lucky enough to qualify, you can sit in this contraption, have lights shone on your head, maybe improve your brain function, and pick up a few hundred dollars. Now, I want to congratulate each of you, because tonight you have been chosen to be part of a very special experiment. Now, you won't make any money, and, technically, you didn't volunteer. But, you're here already, so you might as well make the best of it.

The experiment is that, instead of looking at a specific Bible passage for our sermon, tonight's sermon text is the entire book of Psalms. That's right, all 150. I hope you packed a snack. Now, my intentions in subjecting you to this experiment are not nefarious. I'm not here to make you suffer. Instead, I hope to accomplish two things by looking at the entire book of Psalms together.

A. Enrich your interaction with the Bible.

I hope that by having a bird's eye view of the book of Psalms and an understanding of the book's central message, you will enjoy a richer feast when you read the Psalms on your own.

At Cornerstone, we affirm that the Bible is ultimately a divine book; it comes from God. There is an implication from this that drives my own research as a biblical scholar: God did not only inspire the content of the Bible; he also inspired its shape. He inspired the literary genre, the way that the book has been put together, and the book's structure.

Usually people think of the book of Psalms as Ancient Israel's hymnbook or David's greatest hits album. However, tonight I'd like for us to conduct a thought experiment. What if, instead of reading individual psalms in isolation from one another, we read Psalms as a book? What if we tried to understand it as a literary work that has been intentionally put together with a unified message? What if, instead of listening to the psalms as an anthology of Ancient Israel's greatest hits, we listened to it like a concept album, where the individual tracks come together to have a greater meaning collectively than they do on their own? We can think of the book of Psalms like a quilt. Each square in the quilt is good and beautiful in its own right. However, there is another level of artistry in the way that the squares have been arranged and stitched together to make a final product. Or, we could think about the book of Psalms like a photomosaic, where 150 individual portraits have been arranged and combined to yield a collective portrait.

B. Deepen your faith in Christ.

When I say that I hope looking at the book of Psalms as a whole will deepen your faith in Jesus, I have in mind Jesus's words in Luke 24:44. Jesus speaks these words to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead:

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

So, according to Jesus, the book of Psalms is not just Ancient Israel's songbook; it is a prophetic witness to his person and work. It's interesting to note that Jesus and the

apostles were not unique in their own time in interpreting the book of Psalms as a prophetic book; the people who wrote the DSS and the people who translated Psalms from Hebrew to Greek, all of whom lived in the last centuries before Jesus's birth, also believed that the book had a future, prophetic outlook.

So, in approaching the book of Psalms, we are essentially interested in two questions:

1. How has the book of Psalms been put together?
2. How does the book of Psalms testify to Jesus and the gospel?

I contend tonight that these questions must be considered together for us to arrive at a satisfactory answer to either.

C. Prerequisites

Before we jump into these two questions, there are a couple prerequisites, things that the book of Psalms assumes you already know about:

i. God's Covenant with David

David was the greatest king in Israel's history, and his story is told in 1-2 Samuel. A key moment in David's reign occurs in 2 Samuel 7. Here, David is dwelling in his newly built palace and his heart is struck when he realizes that God is worshipped in a tent while he dwells in a palace. He resolves to build a "house," that is, a temple, for God and Nathan, the prophet of God, approves. God, however, sends a different message. He sends Nathan back to King David to say that David will not build a "house" for God (a temple). Instead, God will build a "house" for David, meaning that he will establish a royal dynasty for David. Hear the words of the promise that God makes to David (2 Sam 7:12-14a):

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son.

The promise is that David's heir will succeed him as king, he will build God's temple and be God's son. In some sense, this promise applies to David's son Solomon, David's immediate successor and the builder of the first temple, and the entire succession of kings descended from David. However, from the perspective of those who put together the book of psalms, Solomon and the other Davidic kings had not exhausted God's promise to David. The fulfillment of God's words remains open-ended.

ii. The Exile to Babylon

If you continue to read about Israel's history in 1-2 Kings, you'll see that most of David's sons were not faithful to God as he was. They led God's people into grievous sin and idolatry. As a result, God eventually brought the Babylonian Empire, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar II, against Jerusalem. It is difficult to describe the devastation that followed. Jerusalem was conquered. The people were exiled. The temple was burned. The king descended from David was imprisoned. From a geopolitical perspective, Davidic kingship has never been reestablished.

It is very important to know that it is sometime after the exile to Babylon that the book of Psalms was put together.

This brings us finally to the book of Psalms itself. We will begin with a video put together by the Bible Project that gives a nice introduction Psalms as a unified book.

II. Bible Project Video

For the rest of tonight's message, I'm going to build on the description of the book of Psalms given in the Bible Project's video. We're interested in understanding the shape of the book of Psalms as well as how the book of Psalms should shape us.

III. The Book of Psalms teaches us about:

A. Jesus and Hope.

1. The "architecture" of the book of Psalms testifies to hope in a future Messiah.

By "architecture," I mean the book's organizing and structural framework, the clues to how it's been put together and what the book's editors cared about the most. When we read a book, we usually think of something that one person sat down and wrote beginning to end. However, this is not the way that the book of Psalms was put together. The book of Psalms has topography. It has texture. Certain passages have a particular prominence. What do we see at these strategic locations in the book of Psalms. It is precisely at these places in the book that psalms about the king or God's covenant with David are placed.

Remember that Psalms has a clear introduction (Psalms 1-2) and conclusion (Psalms 146-150). Both of these sections contain psalms about the Davidic king (Psalm 2; 148). Also, Book II of the psalms ends with a vision of the future messianic king (72), while book III ends with a lament concerning God's covenant with David (89). Thus, the transition points between books 2, 3, and 4 all focus on the king. Also, recall from the Bible Project video that both books I and V have at their center psalms about the king. Psalms 18 and 118, for example.

What I want you to see here is that at the key, structural points of the book, the recurrent theme is the Messiah. God's anointed king. The son of David. If the book of Psalms is a quilt, then the Messianic hope is both the border and the seamwork. It is the recurring melody of the symphony. This framing colors the way that you read everything else inside. So, noticing the messianic "architecture" of the book of Psalms shows us what the editors of the book were interested in and colors the way that we read the rest of the book.

We should also think about the political situation in Israel at the time that the book of Psalms was put together. Remember that there is no king. Yet, there are all these songs about the king. What does this imply? These are not just songs about the king; these are songs about the *future* king. These are songs of hope and expectation.

2. Application: Let us hope in Christ's return.

This is one of the reasons that the book of Psalms is so important for Christians. The book reminds us that, though Christmas and Easter have come, we are not done waiting. We are not done hoping. Paul tells us in Phil 3:20 that our citizenship is in heaven and that we are eagerly waiting for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not done waiting. We are engaged; our heart's love has given us a pledge of marriage. Yet, the wedding day has not come. So, we set our hopes on that day. We hope; we wait; we believe. Are you eagerly awaiting Jesus's return?

May we heed David's command in his lament in Psalm 27, where he concludes: I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Or the refrain of Psalms 42-43, which open book 2 of the Psalms: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; For I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

The "architecture" of the book of Psalms testifies to hope in a future Messiah. Therefore, let us hope in Christ's return.

Next, the book of Psalms teaches us about Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

B. Jesus and God's Kingdom.

1. Interpretation: The book of Psalms teaches that the Messiah will establish God's kingdom on the earth.

This, to me, is one of the most fascinating aspects of what is happening in the book of Psalms. You see, elsewhere in the OT there is a tension between God's kingship and human kingship. The two ideas seem to be like oil and water. However, in Psalms the threads of divine and human kingship begin to come together. Earlier we looked at the book's architecture. However, what if we also read the book as though it were a story, one with a flow, a plot, twists and turns? Let's take a look at how kingship develops within the story of the book of Psalms.

We're going to look specifically at how the five books tell the story of kingship.

Books 1-2. Books 1-2 mostly contain psalms related to King David. We can consider this section of the psalter as home base, establishing a general confidence and hope in the Davidic king. The final psalm of book 2 (72) describes the ideal king and the blessing that will come to whole world when he reigns. There is a hard break at the end of book 2, which announces that the prayers of David are ended.

Book 3, on the other hand, is the low point of the psalter. This section contains the largest concentration of community laments. There are no praise psalms in Book 3. If Psalms is a symphony, Book 3 is definitely in a minor key. It ends on a particularly dark note. Psalm 88 is a lament that has no statement of hope. The last line of the lament states that darkness is the poet's companion. Then, Psalm 89 is an extremely important discussion of God's covenant with David. The

psalm retells God's promise to David of an everlasting dynasty in 2 Samuel 7. However, he cannot reconcile this with the current state of affairs in which there is no Davidic king; he has been cut off. The poet laments, "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?" He asks the LORD where his faithfulness to his promises to David is. So, Book 3 is written out of the despair caused by the exile and the cutting off of Davidic kingship. It is a song of weeping arising from the dissonance between God's promise and the current state of affairs.

In some sense, books 3 and 4 are like a call and response song, with book 4 providing an answer to the despair of Book 3. Interestingly, Book 4 is the only book that contains no explicit discussion of the covenant with David. This is because Book 4 is interested in something else. The centerpiece of Book 4 is a series of songs (Psalms 93-100) called "enthronement psalms." There is a running refrain through this section that recalls the crescendo of Israel's song after the victory over Egypt at the Red Sea: "The LORD is king." In the face of the exile and the lack of a king on David's throne, Book 4 gives a resounding response: "God remains king."

Because of this, Book V returns to a renewed hope and confidence in God's faithfulness to keep his promise to David. We see this in places like Psalms 110, 118, 132, and 148.

What I want you to see is that the two threads of divine and human kingship are starting to come together in the book of Psalms. They are no longer seen in opposition to one another. In fact, confidence that God is king is the foundation of the hope that the son of David will be king after all.

See how these two themes are tied together in the introduction to Psalms in Psalm 2. Let's reread the first part of Psalm 2 (Ps 2:1-6)

- 1 Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- 3 "Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."

The scene is one in which foreign kings are plotting to rebel against God's anointed king, his Messiah. Note the response:

- 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.

God is described as "the One enthroned." What kind of people are enthroned? Kings. The psalm is depicting God as king. And he's laughing, not because he thinks human rebellion is funny but because it's futile. His rule is not threatened.

- 5 He rebukes them in his anger

and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
 6 “I have installed my king
 on Zion, my holy mountain.”

The theology of the song is clear. God is king. His rule is not threatened. Therefore, his chosen king will rule on the earth. Here, God’s kingship in heaven is expressed on the earth by the Davidic Messiah. The Messiah represents the coming of God’s kingdom to the earth. This is why in the NT, Jesus is constantly stating that, now that he has come, the kingdom of God is at hand.

The book of Psalms teaches that the Messiah will establish God’s kingdom on the earth.

God’s kingship is the grounds for our hope that the Messiah will indeed reign on the earth. The Messiah’s reign on earth is the expression and realization of God’s heavenly kingship.

This truth should reorient us toward God’s kingdom.

2. Application: Let us reorient our lives toward God’s kingdom.
 This is a great comfort for us as well as a great challenge.

- a. Comfort: At our lowest, darkest moment, deepest despair, when our parents are dying or our kids rebel or we lose a pregnancy or we’re laid off or the darkness in our own minds will not lift or we’re failing in school or whatever else you’re going through, God remains king.
 - What is the storm that you’re in right now? Know that God is king.
 - We can know this because at the very darkest moment in all of history, when God’s own son was cruelly murdered, God was on his throne. He was still king. And we see clearly that he was still good. So, you can know that he remains king now in the midst of your storm.
 - To borrow from artist JJ Heller, No matter how the wind may blow, it cannot shake the sun.
 - Rest in God’s unshakeable kingship.
- b. Challenge: Focusing on God’s kingdom shows us that God’s agenda is not ours. Ultimately, this is freeing, because God’s agenda is the only one that will truly satisfy us.
 - This is a call for us to surrender our petty kingdoms and exchange them for God’s kingdom.
 - When you die, what will people say that you spent your life on? What is the kingdom that you are giving your life to build?
 - You have one life to live; spend it well. Give it away for the sake of Christ, who is king, who is establishing God’s rule on the earth.
 - Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is precious. It is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man happens upon. Upon finding this treasure, what does he do? In his great joy he sells all that he has and buys that field.

- May we spend our lives selling our petty kingdoms to buy that field. The book of Psalms redirects our focus to the preciousness of the kingdom of God.

C. Jesus and Suffering.

1. Interpretation: The book of Psalms describes a suffering Messiah.
 - a. Many portraits of David: musician, warrior, reigning king, heinous sinner, broken repent.
 - b. It seems to me, however, that the portrait of David that predominates in Psalms is that of the innocent sufferer. We see this especially in David's laments, which dominate the first 72 chapters of Psalms.
 - c. However, the messianic frame of the book of Psalms suggests that these laments of the righteous sufferer have significance beyond that of David's life. David has come to prefigure the messiah.
 - d. Thus, in some sense, David does not simply mean David in the book of Psalms. This might seem odd; however, it is not unique within the OT. Take Ezekiel, for example. Listen to the way that Ezekiel 34 describes God's final salvation of his people (vv. 23-24):

I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Now, David has long been in his grave when Ezekiel writes these words. So, what does Ezekiel mean when he says that David will again be king over the people? Clearly, David does not mean David right here. It means David's son, the messianic king, the new David.

- e. Thus, many of the Davidic laments in Psalms take on a prophetic dimension. They are not so much songs about the Messiah as they are the songs that the Messiah himself sings. In David, we hear the voice of the New David.
 - f. This is precisely the way that Peter reads Psalms in his sermon in Acts 2. After quoting Psalm 16, Peter says that this psalm was a prophecy of Jesus's resurrection. On the basis of God's covenant with David, David was prophesying about the Messiah.
 - g. What is remarkable about reading Psalms this way is that in the psalms we often hear the voice of a Messiah who suffers. He is betrayed by those closest to him, he suffers unjustly. Yet, he entrusts himself to God and trusts that he will be vindicated.
 - h. It is precisely these parts of David's laments in the Psalms in which the NT sees prophecies about Jesus's betrayal and crucifixion and God's vindication of him at his resurrection.
2. Application: Let us "sanctify" our suffering. This has big implications for the way that the Psalms can help us in our own seasons of suffering.

- a. My tendency: suffering is secular.
- b. The Psalms meet me in my suffering and are in invitation to pray honestly out of the depths of my suffering.
- c. The Psalms invite us to “sanctify” our suffering. Sanctify = set apart, make holy. To not treat my suffering as secular but as sacred, as an opportunity to deepen fellowship with God.
- d. This takes on a different dimension when we hear Jesus’s voice in the psalms.
 - i. In the midst of our suffering, we find that we are sharing with Christ in his suffering.
 - ii. This gives us hope that as we share in Jesus’s suffering, we will also share in his vindication and glorification in his resurrection.
 - iii. In our suffering, we are invited to pray with Jesus.

D. Jesus and Scripture.

- 1. The Bible Project video does a great job of showing how the book of Psalms constantly combines the themes of messianic hope and meditation on God’s word. This happens in the introduction to the book, as Psalm 1 begins by saying “blessed is the one whose delight in God’s word” and Psalm 2 concludes by saying “blessed is the one who takes refuge in the Messiah.” This combination of Scripture and Messiah is also at the center of books 1 and 5 (Pss 18-19, 118-119). This combination drives home the message of Psalms 1-2: God’s blessing belongs to those who meditate on God’s word and have faith in the Messiah.
- 2. It’s no accident that I began tonight by saying that my motive for subjecting you to this experiment is to (a) enrich your interaction with the Bible and (b) deepen your faith in Jesus. This is exactly what the book of Psalms is trying to do. Call you deeper into the Bible; call you deeper into Christ. For, there God’s blessing is found. Will you follow? Because God’s blessing belongs to those who meditate on God’s word and have faith in the Messiah, let us seek Jesus in the pages of the Bible.