

DISCUSSION OF THE PSALMS - PART VI

THE PENITENTIAL PSALMS

I. The penitential psalms are seven psalms that have commonly been used among Christians, especially in the Western tradition, to express emotions and offer prayers in times of difficulty or for repentance of sins. These psalms are: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

A. For the most part they are psalms of lamentation, expressing present distress and the desire to be delivered from it.

B. They generally express more individual contrition and lament, although the psalmist confidence is tied into God's providence for all His people, His "steadfast love" and fidelity to the covenant.

C. They generally express a recognition of guilt, both individual and as a part of the whole human race, and tie their distress to that guilt.

1. The distress usually takes the form of illness and abandonment by former friends.

2. There is usually a reference to an undefined enemy against whom the psalmist pleads for deliverance.

3. There is often a feeling that God is at a distance and a plea for Him to be closer, and to hear the psalmist's prayers.

4. Most of the psalms express confidence that God will deliver one who calls upon Him for help.

II. Psalm 6 confesses to a guilt that causes his very bones to be ill.

A. There is a feeling that God is ignoring the psalmists, which is largely worse than the illness and potential death.

B. The psalmist fears death above all because he believes that it will cut him off from the covenant and keep him from praising God. Praising God seems to be the high point of life.

C. The psalm then ends with a threefold confident note that God has heard his prayers, and that his foes will be defeated.

III. Psalm 32, alone among the penitential psalms, is not really a psalm of lamentation but rather combines themes of trust, wisdom, and thanksgiving.

A. The psalmist draws from his own experience to teach a lesson that the confession of sins leads to healing, both spiritual and physical.

- Roman's 4 argues from verses 1 and 2 that this healing is available to all people, not only those of the Old Covenant.

B. Verses 3 and 4 connect the concealment of sins to physical illness. Proverbs 28:13 indicates positively that honesty about one's sins lead to prosperity. In the Book of Job, Job's final plea is that he has confessed his sins. Job 31:33.

C. The psalm then draws from this experience an overall lesson about God's salvation for His faithful people.

1. The psalmist compares salvation to being saved from the waters. The Book of Jonah and the sea miracles of Jesus would make this metaphor literal, but ironically for those whose faith was weak.

2. The stubborn who refuse to admit guilt are compared to dumb beasts. Pride ironically reduces one to humility.

D. There is a concluding contrast between the happiness of the honest, who experience God's mercy. The experience of Zacchaeus exemplifies this joy. See Luke 19.

IV. Psalm 38 reflects distress because of the punishments that come from sin: illness, abandonments of friends, and the near triumph of enemies.

A. This psalm and psalm 143 express an appeal to God, but do not end with shows of confidence. The other penitential psalms do.

B. The psalm has three appeals

1. Verse 1-8 asks God to relieve the physical sufferings that are caused by sin. Lamentations 3 reflects a similar prayer, but expresses confidence that God's wrath will not last forever.

- Perhaps surprisingly, interpreting physical illness as a punishment from God or a call to repentance gives comfort because it implies that the same God will provide a cure once its purpose has ended.

2. Verses 8-15 then describe how the psalmist's friends have abandoned him.

3. The psalmist then says he will wait for the Lord and asks God to come to him. Job ends his pleas with a desire that God come and answer him, as desire that it answered in spades. Job 32:3ff.

V. Psalm 51, largely in response to the criticism of psalm 50 that the sacrifices have become worthless because of the people's infidelity, offers God a confession, contrite heart, and desire to repent.

A. The heading indicates it was originally meant to describe David after Nathan revealed his crimes. But it appears to have been modified for a broader application.

B. Verses 1-2 introduce the theme of washing away sin, blotting out debt.

C. Verses 3-9 express confession of sins and a desire for forgiveness. They cross reference purification rites of ancient Israel for the cleansing of leprosy, the original Passover, and a sin offering on behalf of the people by Aaron. See Lev. 14.

D. Verses 10-17 then positively ask for a new spirit for teaching and praise. See Ez. 11:19; 37; Joel 3.

E. Verses 16-17 offer a contrite spirit to make the sacrifices worthwhile.

F. Verses 18-19 then apply the whole psalm to Jerusalem and the people of God.

VI. Psalm 102 expresses the sorrows of one who is near to death. He seems to rest and be satisfied, not with individual healing, but rather the vision of God's providence and eternity.

A. Verses 1-3 metaphorically ask God to turn His face toward the psalmist. The irony is that, under the old dispensation, no one

could see the face of God and live.

B. The psalmist then describes his illness and isolation. He seems to be healed by the vision of God's salvation of His whole people.

C. After going back to a lament about the shortness of his life, he then turns again to a vision of the eternity of God. See Heb. 1:10-12, 13:7-8.

VII. Psalm 130 is one of the pilgrim psalms and expresses an individual struggle from "the depths," which could refer to death or a time of despair that seems like death.

A. The psalmist recognizes universal guilt, but this recognition gives him confidence in God's willingness to forgive. Contrast Job 9:2-4.

B. The psalmist then goes back to a situation of anxious waiting, comparing himself to a watchman who longs for the day that will bring rest and safety. Some draw an analogy to waiting throughout this life for the dawn of life eternal.

C. The psalmist then bases his trust upon God's fidelity to His people and His steadfast love.

D. This psalm is often prayed for the dead, to express a longing to be delivered through death to heaven.

VIII. Psalm 143 is a continuous plea for God's help, based upon His favor and the holiness of His name.

A. The psalmist feels as though God is not hearing him, and is allowing a certain enemy to triumph. He fears the end of his companionship with God.

B. Ironically, the psalmist is, perhaps unknowingly, being drawn closer to God, for he continually expresses a desire to be taught by God and to be a servant of God.