

DISCUSSION OF THE PSALMS - PART VII

PSALMS OF LAMENTATION AND TRUST

I. Psalms of lamentation and psalms of trust are two sides of the same coin, inspired poetry on God's guidance of His people, together and individually, from the standpoint of one who is in the midst of struggles or who has overcome them.

A. Psalms of lamentation tend to be from the standpoint of one who is in the midst of struggles and is beseeching God's help. They typically, but do not always end with an expression of confidence in God. Psalms of trust are more from the standpoint, of one who has been delivered from distress or who sees deliverance in sight. Compare Ps.120 and Ps. 118. Many of the psalms mix these two elements. E.g. Ps. 29. Some emphasize individual struggles more (e.g., most of the Penitential Psalms); some emphasize the community or Israel more. E.g., Ps. 129, 132. But they frequently combine both concerns, going back and forth between the individual struggle and the community. E.g., Ps. 3.

- Illness, the oppression of enemies, and a sense of distance from God and the Temple are the most common things that the psalmist either suffers from or has been delivered from. E.g., Ps. 6, 38; 42;137; 138. The Psalmist frequently thanks God for being a strong refuge, for delivering him and the people of God, and for allowing the Chosen People into His presence. The psalmist occasionally thanks God for the fruitfulness of the earth or asks for relief from economic poverty. Compare Ps. 65:9-13; 40:17.; 41:1.

B. Wisdom psalms, by contrast, (e.g., psalms 1 and 119) are more general. Although likely based upon the personal experience of the psalmist, they do not as much describe his feelings.

C. Jesus' personal experience would thus be reflected more in the psalms of lamentation and trust. For example, He quotes psalm 22:1 on the Cross. Likewise, the crowds live out Psalm 118:26-27 in Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem and He later quotes verse 22 to describe the Pharisees rejection of Him. See Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11. He quotes psalms 69:9 in driving out the money-changers from the Temple and fulfills the same psalm on the Cross when the people offer Him vinegar in His thirst. His preaching frequently builds more on the ideas expressed in the wisdom psalms. Thus, for example, the Sermon on the Mount ends with a discourse on the two ways using an analogy to the building of a house, possibly a reference to the image in

psalm 127:1.

D. Some psalms combine elements of wisdom and thanksgiving, as well as history and praise. For example, Psalm 119 teaches the wisdom lesson that God uses suffering to bring people back to a rightful fear of the Lord and trust in Him. But the language reflects more emotion than is typical wisdom literature.

E. The psalms of lamentation and trust both often reflect a desire for vengeance upon enemies. Sometimes the psalmist simply asks God to inflict vengeance, sometimes he calls upon others to do so. E.g., Psalm 109; 118:10-13; 136:10-20; 137:9; 139:19-22; 143:12

1. Without a notion of the grace and reconciliation won by Christ and offered to all, these psalms can seem very harsh, and if prayed in isolation, they would be. Even ancient Jewish thought said that one should be just to an enemy and seek their improvement. Lev. 19:16-17, 23:4-5; Prov. 24:17, 25:21. In addition, there were prophecies of a time in which all nations would be gathered before God. Psalm 87; Isaiah 66:18ff. Thus, these psalms should not be seen in isolation.

2. The psalms that reflect a desire for vengeance can be read consistently with Christianity in one or more of several ways:

- a. In some cases, they reflect a rightful desire to defend God's people or the innocent in general against the attacks of oppressors. E.g., Ps 118:10ff; 136:10ff ; cf. Romans 13:4.

- b. They also reflect the earlier state in moral thinking involving above all a desire to see sin punished and good rewarded. It is a higher level to go further and desire the reconciliation of the sinner as well. But one must first begin with a sense of basic justice, lest a desire for forgiveness become moral laxity or indifference. The most common criticisms of the kings of Israel and Judah was that they engaged in idolatry and tolerated evil. See also 1 Cor. 5; Rev. 2:20, 3:15-17.

- c. There is a notion that, if God punishes evil, they evil-doer will repent and be saved. See Wisdom 11:17-26. Frequently, reflecting on the vengeance God will take on enemies, although harsh, was still a better alternative than doing so oneself. See Prov. 24:27-30; Romans 12:19.

- D. The harsher passages can still be applied even now to things other than human, especially to the forces of the

devil or institutions that are corrupting. See Rev. 11:17-18, 12:10-12.

II. Psalms 22 and 23 reflect the need for God's guidance and salvation in the midst of dangers and enemies.

A. Psalm 22 is a quintessential psalm of lamentation, describing vividly the physical and social suffering of the psalmist, but above all the sense that God is distant. It ends, however, with a note of confidence that God will bring him through and that he will be able to lead nations to glorify God. Jesus quoted the beginning of this psalm from the Cross. Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34.

1. The first 11 verses go back and forth between the present seemingly impossible current situation and the fact that God cares for His people in general and for the individual.

a. The agony is first over God's distance and then over his rejection by people. The reference to being a worm may reflect Isaiah's prophesy that Israel generally is like a worm whom God will raise up to judge nations. Isaiah 41:14ff

b. The psalmist has faith, but it is used against him.

2. The psalm then turns to a combination of vicious enemies (compared to dogs, bulls, and dogs) and physical oppression. The reference to the bulls of Bashan is noteworthy because they were supposed to be a source of blessings. See Duet. 32:14. But by the time of Amos in the 8th century, the land became a place of economic oppression. Amos 4:1. The description in this psalm is remarkable similar to Jesus' sufferings.

3. The psalm turns on the prayer in verses 20-22, which lead into the confident proclamation of salvation.

4. In the later verses, the psalmist is confident that he will recover and thank God by bringing peoples to worship Him. The vision begins with the Chosen People, but then extends to all nations and even to the dead and future generations.

a. The verb tense changes to reflect the deliverance already given. The psalm then draws a general lesson from this deliverance.

b. Unusual for the psalms, the psalmist then seems in verse 30 even to be able to announce God's providence even to the dead. For a mere human, the idea may be that, if God got the psalmist out of a seemingly impossible situation,

He will deliver even the faithful who have died. But verse 30 applies in fullness only to Jesus.

B. Psalm 23 draws together numerous images of God's care for His people, the shepherd, the guide, the good host, and the strong Temple.

1. The psalm begins with the image of God as the shepherd of the individual psalmist. Genesis Isaiah, and Ezekiel described God as the shepherd of His people generally. See Gen. 49:24; Is. 40:11; Ez. 34:11-16. David was compared to a shepherd for God's people, and other leaders were supposed to be shepherds, but often failed. See 2 Sam. 5:2, 24:27; Is. 44:28; Jer. 2:8, 10:21. 23:1-3: Ez 34:1-10. God promised new good shepherds for His people and one shepherd in the line of David for all His people. Jer. 23:1-6; Ez. 34:23.

2. This psalm applies this image to God's guidance of the individual . Jesus would then adopt this image for Himself. John 10

3. There is a dramatic contrast between the idyllic scene of the green pastures and the tranquil waters, on the one hand, and the valley of the shadow of death on the other. One can easily see the appreciation the Jews had for the law of God. God would guide them to avoid dangers and sins no one could avoid on his own. See Isaiah 50:10-12. The term "valley of darkness" is a image for death. See. Job 10:21.

4. There is a sense of arrival at a banquet, an image of the messianic kingdom, and an image Jesus uses of heaven. See Is. 25:6; Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15 But even now being in the Temple is a beginning part of that celebration. The sacrifice of animals and breads did literally involve a feast, for the sacrifices would be eaten. In addition, the worship of God is a foretaste of heaven. See Vatican II, Sacrosanctum Concilium 8.

III. Psalms 65 and 137 reflect the People of God in very different circumstances, one prospering and a sign to the nations, and the other in exile.

A. Psalm 65 combines praise and thanksgiving, calling on Israel, all nations, and then all of creation itself to praise God and thank Him for His forgiveness, protection, and generosity.

1. The psalm begins with call to praise God in Jerusalem at the temple. The first thing God is praised for is the forgiveness

of sins. The idea seems to be that God purifies His people before allowing them into His presence. The Hebrew text also indicates that "rest" is due to God. The idea may be that we owe God the Sabbath rest as the beginning of His providence. See Gen. 2:3; Duet 5:12-15; Is. 58:13.

2. The psalmist then turns to God's power. He describes God's "awesome" or "dreadful" deeds. For God's power fills one with a sense of wonder, but also a sense of fear at being so close to Him.

3. The psalmist reflects upon the fact that God will protect all people from both the storms of nature and the storms of history. There is perhaps a reflection upon the Great Flood and an early image of the idea of God's people on a ship tossed about at sea. See e.g., Matt. 8:23; Mk. 4:35. The solidity of the mountains represent God's continual providence and guidance.

4. The psalmist then celebrates the fertility of the fields, knowing that it is God who brings about this prosperity. The psalm ends with an idyllic scene reminiscent of an unfallen world and reflecting a new creation. See Is. 65:1-25; Amos 9:13-15; Rev. 22:1-2.. The image is that nature herself rejoices to be fruitful.

B. Psalm 137 record in poignant terms the sorrow and anger of a people in exile.

1. The context is the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom, which lasted from 587-538 B.C.. The Babylonians no doubt found the Jews to be a fascinating people (although there were persecutions as well when the powers felt threatened.)

2. The psalm begins with the people in exile at last appreciating the holy land that they had lost. They had been exiled precisely because they allowed pagan practices, especially idolatry, into their land. Now they cannot bring themselves to celebrate without that land. The native Babylonians cannot understand their plight.

3. God had promised that, if the Israelites remained faithful in this land of exile, He would bring them back. And so the psalmist promises that he will never forget his native land. He asks that, if he forgets that land, his hand and tongue be no longer able to play any instrument of sing any song.

4. He becomes furious at the Babylonians and the Edomites, who cooperated with them, and so asks for vengeance on

them. It should be noted that the word for "little ones" could also be translated "young men," who would in turn be soldiers.

5. Now the psalm is often prayed as a longing for heaven in this land of exile, and a desire to destroy the forces of evil that keep people the kingdom of God from being more fully established on earth. As St. Augustin said, "What are the little ones of Babylon? Evil desires at their birth." Exposition on the Psalms 137:12.