

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS – PART THREE – PSALMS 73-89

Again let's use the same basic questions as we explore this new section of the Psalms.

Each Psalm is a 'prescription'. But the right prescription must be fitted to the right disease. Read one Psalm at a time and then answer these questions.

1. Was the writer admitting a particular problem or need? What was it? How do people have the same need today?
2. To what extent had the writer's need been met by the end of the Psalm? What questions still remain unanswered?
3. What answer does the writer find to his own questions? How does the New Testament present the same idea?
4. To a person facing what sort of life circumstances might you recommend this Psalm?
5. What does the Psalm teach us about Christ?

When you have completed this section of Psalms, answer two more questions.

6. What ideas have you found repeated in more than one Psalm?
7. How does each Psalm lead on to the next one?

Psalm 73 begins a new book of Psalms with a further series of songs by Asaph and a very frank admission of near disaster despite the goodness of God. The reason is almost universal even among the strongest believers. The arrogant in their pride seem to get away with their greed, bullying and superior attitude which puts God's people down. They even dare to ridicule God as they bask in their wealth. The Lord's followers are left feeling faithfulness in tough times is a futile waste of time. We struggle to understand until we come quietly into the presence of God. Then He shows us how temporary is their success until they are brought down in death and judgement. We wake up to the animal nature of our grumbling and determine again to trust ourselves again only into the Lord's care and keeping. We realise how different our destiny is, how nothing really matters except His strength and nearness. Now we have a beautiful message for the world which is confused as we have been.

Psalm 74 turns from our part in the seeming absence of God at difficult times to ask the question, why has God withdrawn from us? Why is He angry with us? Has He forgotten that He redeemed us? Why have the enemies of God been allowed to do so much damage to the temple, the place of worship? Why does God seem to have been silent? Then the complainant remembers the work of His Creator and the way He demonstrated His sovereignty over even the greatest sea monster, the whole solar system and the seasons. Now he asks the Lord to step back into the lives of His people as He promised. He realises the heart of the apparent absence of God is that since Adam on we have thought we could deal with our problems and the enemy ourselves. We cannot. Let's face it!

Psalm 75 returns from the struggle of the last two Psalms to unreserved thankfulness for all He is and has done. Judgement is God's business not mine. He alone is to deal with the proud and He alone will lift up those who trust Him. Judgement is coming so I must leave it entirely to Him. My privilege is to tell everyone how good God is and what He offers us in Jesus Christ. Those who continue in their arrogant rejection are the Lord's problem.

Psalm 76 continues the theme of God as judge and what this means in practical terms for us. He is the undisputed victor over all His enemies who have every reason to fear Him. On the other hand the humble who trust Him have absolute assurance of His protection and salvation and need fear nothing and no-one. We are to promise ourselves to Him and be faithful to our word. Faith in Him is the only gift He asks of us.

Psalm 77 is the perfect prescription for the patient who is depressed. It begins with him lying awake at night unable to sleep, sad and troubled. He is wondering where God is in his problems. He can only think of the past, the good times which have gone and the bad times which he cannot forget. He assumes God has changed, that He no longer shows lovingkindness, graciousness and faithfulness to His promises. He concludes that all this is his own fault and that God is punishing him. Then his whole way of thinking begins to change as he starts to focus on the word of God, His unchanging character and the wonderful things He has done in the past. He recalls how the Lord worked in creating the world and how nothing could stop His plan. Finally he remembers how He used Moses and Aaron to lead a depressed down-trodden nation out of captivity. What He did then He can do in me now!

Psalm 78 takes the solution of the previous Psalm and examines it more thoroughly. It explores the marvellous treasure of the word of God and our privilege in being able to share it with others, beginning with our children. Our hope is that they in turn will teach their own children so that each generation will be equipped to avoid the depression in the face of adversity described in Psalm 77. Prevention is better than cure. The song writer retells the story of the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea and entry into the Promised Land. Time after time the Israelites forgot God's goodness, rebelled and complained. The Lord showed them the futility of their ways, they repented and He forgave them. But they continued to repeat the same painful cycle with the same consequences right down to the time of David and beyond. Why don't we learn instead of sending ourselves into deep depression because we think the Lord has left us when it is we who have left Him and His word?

Psalm 79 moves ahead presumably to the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of the next experience of captivity in 586BC. The reason is the same. They have neglected God. Conditions are tough. The neighbours are laughing at them again. But it has brought them back to face their sin and their need of forgiveness. Already there is a sense of expectation that the Lord will find His lost sheep yet again and bring them home.

Psalm 80 uses a familiar Bible image, the vine,(Isa.5, John 15) to look at the problem of adversity and how much harder the ridicule of others makes the pain. Asaph appeals to the Lord as the Shepherd and at the same time the King. The illustration is that of the vine rescued from Egypt and planted in the land of Canaan. At first it was great and fruitful but now it seems broken down, stripped and burned. He longs for it to be restored to its original condition. Three times he repeats his prayer for restoration, the face of God to shine again and for salvation. Jesus gave a simple condition for this prayer to be granted – abide in Me.(Jn.15:4-7)

Psalm 81 is another worship song with instructions to the musicians to use their instruments on the special days God planned to be teaching times for His people, beginning from the time He redeemed them out of Egypt. He reminds them how they were set free from slavery, protected and provided for as they began their new life. Above all other instructions was the order to have no other gods but to be fed truth by the Lord alone. Sadly they did not listen and turned to other gods so God had to let them learn the hard way which led them to defeat by their enemies. If only they would turn back to Him He would free them again and satisfy their every need including their hunger for real answers to life's problems.

Psalm 82 reminds God's people that He is the one true Judge. If they belong to Him then why do they not treat the needy among them fairly? Why is their justice system corrupt? Why do the weak go unprotected and the hungry unfed? Why do the poor continue to be exploited by the rich and powerful? Why do the children of the Creator wander around in spiritual and moral darkness when they could be making a difference? Please Lord step in and fix the mess we have made!

Psalm 83 is Asaph's final Psalm in his series of eleven songs. He wants God to respond to all the thoughts he has tried to express in the previous ten Psalms. He is aware of how keen the enemies of God's people are to wipe them out once and for all. He recalls all their historic rivals who have attempted genocide so that they could take over 'the pastures of God.' He asks God to turn their hatred back on them to show yet again how good God is to those who trust Him.

Psalm 84 begins a group of songs by the sons of Korah, the first of which is written by someone really enjoying his relationship with God which he wants others to share. He compares his comfort in God to a bird at home in its nest. He feels totally at home in Christ and wants the Lord to be at home in him. He knows it is the starting point of all blessing and strength. Being in the Lord will turn tears of sorrow into a life-giving spring and a place of growth towards knowing the Lord better. It gives him confidence that the Lord always hears his prayer so that he is protected and enlightened. The presence of God is the best place in the world. Nothing good will be withheld from him. Why would he ever want to be anywhere else?

Psalm 85 goes back a step to recall how the joy in the presence of God described in the previous Psalm came about. God's restoration of His people began with complete forgiveness and in the Old Testament atonement, covering of sin. In the New Testament through the cross, the blood of Jesus cleanses what had previously been covered – even better!(I Jn.1:7,9) Consequently the anger of God which would otherwise have had to be expressed in judgement has gone. But what do we have to do for restoration to happen and His joy and loving kindness to be experienced? We need to listen to His message of peace and turn from the folly of a self-run life to Him. Then His truth will lead us on an exciting new adventure in right living.

Psalm 86 is popped in at this point as a prayer of David as he sought to apply the principle of the previous Psalm in difficult circumstances at the hands of arrogant, violent men. He

knows that at this time he is right with God because he is forgiven and is trusting the Lord. This gives him the confidence to cry out to God for help, knowing the Lord will hear him and answer. He is sure that God is unique and able to do anything He pleases. He wants the Lord again to be his teacher as he walks step by step in oneness with Him and he is immensely thankful. He is relieved as he recalls God's qualities of mercy, grace, lovingkindness and truth. Right now in this situation Lord, apply the truth in me!

Psalm 87 has the sons of Korah again taking up the story, echoing the confidence of David in the Psalm before. It is wonderfully strengthening to know where and to whom we belong. Our foundation is in Christ, (I Cor.3:10-16) represented for Israel in the temple in Jerusalem. The surrounding nations, the neighbours, were well aware of their own identities but at the same time could not deny that the Jews belonged to their God. When they trusted Him this was undeniably obvious because of God's joy which gushed out from them.

Psalm 88 is the work of Heman, one of the sons of Korah, a singer appointed by David and considered very wise, though not as smart as Solomon. (I Kgs:4:31; I Chr.15:19) It is one of the saddest of the Psalms because it asks questions of God from the very depths of despair which seem to go unanswered. He has cried out for help for a long time and he feels close to death still with no response from God. He thinks God has caused his situation and has rejected his cry for help. He believes himself deserted also by his friends perhaps including his wife. He has been in this condition for much of his life yet he believes he has been saved. We are not told whether his distress is caused by physical disability, mental illness or social circumstances. There are people today who struggle for all of these reasons and we need to listen to their cries for help. What do we have to say to Heman?

Psalm 89 is the contribution of Heman's friend, Ethan, a fellow musician, and goes some way to answering Heman's desperate cry for help. He begins by recalling the Lord's lovingkindness and His promise to David and his seed, who is eventually Jesus and those who belong to Him, that He would rule forever. The whole creation will continue to recognise His power and His qualities, and enjoy Him. The secret of experiencing this is to remain in Christ, the Anointed One, to Whom all these promises of victory and provision have been made. When David's offspring turn away from God, the Lord will deal with them individually but not change His promise to his later descendants to keep them and bless them. At such future times of rebellion when everything goes wrong for them and they question why this is happening and where God is, as the Jews did at the time of the crucifixion, the Lord will not forget His love and promises. The world at such times may write God off and ridicule His people but He will not change. Trust Him! Ethan's answer to Heman therefore is that when he is in the depth of despair to remember Jesus who once cried out 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'