Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Unexpected Psalms: Do We Ever Sing Like That?

Hymns:

324 – Blessed Is The Man (Psalm 1)

208 – Why Do The Nations Rage (Psalm 2)

1. Unexpected Psalms: Do We Ever Sing Like That?

God's people throughout the history of the covenant have been a singing people. When Israel was led out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea, Moses and all the people sang a victory song to the Lord, and Miriam and all the women with her went out dancing and singing in victory joy. And onwards God's people continued to sing – and to sing in all kinds of situations. And still we sing today.

The Psalter is given to the people of God as a collection of songs for our use in worship, private and public. What a rich and varied storehouse of treasures the Psalter is! In pastoral ministry I have often encouraged people who are some distress or trouble, and who are finding it hard to pray, that they should start to read through the Psalms, skimming over until they find a psalm that just fits their situation, that gives them words for what is in their hearts in the situation in which they find themselves. I have rarely had anyone say to me that they couldn't find one!

It is quite an audacious collection really! There are psalms that are shocking in the frankness of feeling with which the singer speaks to or of God. Our polite pieties and niceties find very little room in the world of the psalms; they are songs for people who want to say things as they actually are.

This series of studies is going to look at some of the Psalms that might surprise us – psalms of various kinds. What we expect, and find, in the Pslams are songs that praise and glorify and thank God, But we have probably in recent times come to see that there are psalms of lament and protest than there are of joy and exultation. There are also psalms where the enemy is taunted; psalms where curses are called down on the heads of enemies. There are psalms of resolution toward, or praise of, good action, psalms that expounded matters of wisdom, and songs that luxuriate in the glories of God's law. There are prayers for help and protection. There are pleas of innocence and confessions of deep guilt. And we could go on…

Part of my thinking in taking up this topic was that our current hymnody seems to me to be much less varied in its tone. It is only in recent years that the category of lament seems to have re-entered the repetoire of the songs we sing in our gathered worship. But are we singing songs that taunt our and God's enemies, or that call down God's judgment on the wicked, or that express resolve to act aright, or that glory in God's law. I am wondering if we need to engage with the psalms again, in a fresh way, so that our worship may be rescued from the deadly trap of nice politeness.

What are your initial thoughts or reactions to what I have written above?

Psalms 1 and 2

Many scholars speak of Psalms 1 and 2 as being the introduction, or the gateway, or the interpretative key, to the whole of the Psalter, placed there intentionally as guide to the reading (and singing) of all the psalms. There are good reasons for this view, even though the Psalms are decidedly very different in tone or literary style. Psalm 1 is measured and even-handed, a wisdom-tradition poem, whereas Psalm 2 is fiery and derisory, very much a poem in the prophetic line. But the links between them are there:

1. Psalm 1 begins with a blessing ('Blessed is the man…), and Psalm 2 ends with a blessing (Blessed are all…) This is called an *inclusio*, and is a common literary device in the Scriptures. It ties all that lies between into a connectedness.

2. These two psalms do not have authorship by David ascribed to them, unlike the vast majority of the psalms in this first 'book' of Psalms (##1-41.) (Only in Psalms 10 and 33 in this collection is the author(s) also unnamed.) A side-note: the five 'books' of the Psalms may well be a reflection of the five books of the Torah. If that is so, this first book of the Psalms may open like Genesis 1 & 2; two perspectives on the same event.

3. Both Psalms speak of the 'way' (1:1 '… the way of sinners', 1:6 '…the way of the righteous…the way of the wicked', 2:12 '…you perish in the way'); and both speak of 'meditation' – the same word used of the righteous in 1:2 and of the nations in 2:1.

So, if these two Psalms do provide a kind of signpost to the Psalter as a whole, a way of getting our bearings as we begin to enter, what do those bearings tell us about our worship of God in song?

It is clear that in both psalms there are 'Two Ways To Live.' One is the way of wisdom, obedience and faith, and the other is the way of folly, disobedience and rebellion. In both psalms the way of widsom, obedience and faith leads to blessedness and salvation, and the way of folly, disobedience and rebellion leads to judgment. Faith and obedience in Psalm 2 is equated with 'kissing the Son' and not seeking to cast off the 'bonds' of the LORD and His Anointed. To not believe in the Son, to refuse the Lord's Messiah (=Anointed) is to incur, to be under, the wrath of God. So here's a question about our worship. Have we removed the note of God's final judgment from our singing?

These themes line up with the thrust of the message of the gospel in the New Testament. The gospel is a call to the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:1-6, 15:15-19, 16:25-27.) It is only through repentance and faith in Jesus that we pass from death and judgment to life (John 5:21-24; 3:16-18.) The basis of all wise obedience is faith in Jesus. All obedience flows from the grace we find in Jesus. Psalm 1 is a pointer to that way of faith-obedience – a way in which we meditate on God's word and law, seeking to hear from Him about the direction and conduct of our lives.

Jesus Christ alone is the one who can pray the whole psalter with utter sincerity. But we, through the Spirit, are partakers in the true worship of Jesus Christ. None of our worship comes to God pure and holy in its own right. All of our worship must be blood-spattered, must pass through cleansing fire, must go through death and resurrection. Only the One with clean hands and a pure heart can ascend the hill of the Lord, and approach the Most Holy Father (Psalm 24) – and Jesus Christ is that one. All of our worship is made true and holy only in union with the worship of Jesus Christ.