

Psalms, IV

Let us begin by reading Proverbs 4:18-19. “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.”

These verses are somewhat like Psalm 1 in that they contrast the righteous and the wicked. One reason I was really attracted to this set of Proverbs is that it holds such a wonderful hope for the righteous. Again, we need to define that appropriately. It does not mean the people who are just good in themselves or better than others or those who are without sin or anything like that. However, what a wonderful prospect for those of us who, in Christ, are righteous—to think life is not going to get worse and worse. Rather, it has the prospect of getting brighter and brighter until the full light of day, until the high noon when we see God face to face. We may go through some very difficult circumstances, but in a general sense, our path grows ever brighter because we are on our way to heaven. That is one thing that excited me about verse 18.

Why would I choose to focus on verse 19? “The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not even know what makes them stumble.” We have what the wicked need. They do not know what makes them stumble, and we are able to offer it. It is so easy for us to look around us at the wicked—and I think I am guilty of this and I think we all are guilty of this at times—and think, “Why do they not quit doing that?” or “Why do they not do better?” We can begin to feel superior in some sense, forgetting that we are sinners just as they are. The only distinction between us and them is that we are sinners saved by grace. What I really like about this passage is that it says they do not even know what makes them stumble, so rather than standing in judgment of them we should be looking at them in compassion and saying, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” When we are fighting against various societal ills and we see someone involved in them, rather than saying, “What a wicked, wicked, evil malicious person,” I think we should say, “Those people are lost, and what else should we expect from them?” They do not even know what makes them stumble, and thus it is all the more important that we approach them in the right way—not with an attitude that we are better than they are, but with the attitude of those who have been saved out of that stumbling that they do not even understand.

Let us go to the Lord in prayer and commit this time to Him.

Father, we thank You for Your Word, and we do indeed thank You that, while in our own selves and our own efforts, we would be in utter darkness and would not know what makes us stumble. You have come and shined Your light into our lives. You have given us lives that have the prospect of becoming ever brighter as we get to know You better and lives that ultimately will issue in the full light of day as we see You face to face. Lord, what a privilege is ours, what an undeserved mercy on Your part. Lord, forgive us for those times that we have stood in judgment of others and felt superior to them, forgetting who we are and who it is who has saved us. Lord, help us to look at others with hearts of compassion. And just as we would seek to lead someone who is blind and stumbling over the furniture in a room, as we would seek to lead them by the hand to a safe place, Lord, help us to have that same attitude toward the wicked around us who need to be led to the light of Your grace. Father, I pray that You would impress this on our hearts. We thank You for this time. We ask that You would now be with us as we seek to understand Your Word better. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We ended last time with your looking at a certain set of psalms. I would like us to look very briefly at Psalms 30, 54, 56 and 113. Just by way of review, we talked a little bit about form-critical approaches to the psalms. We talked about how to recognize certain stereotypical types or literary types in the psalms.

How did you identify Psalm 30? What did you think Psalm 30 was? Some of you are saying that it is a psalm of thanksgiving. Can you help us identify the typical features? What are the typical features of a song of thanksgiving? The acronym we gave is A-R-C. The first element begins with an A and is an announcement of intent to give thanks. That is followed by the R element, which is recounting or a recapitulation of the need, the problem, the petition, and the deliverance. Then that is followed by the C element, conclusion, which is fairly straightforward. If you look at Psalm 30 you can identify these elements. However, that does not mean we are done and we can simply say this psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving. Some others thought that there was a hymn included in this psalm. There are some hymnic elements. We are going to learn a couple of things here. When we are talking about these formal categories, we need to be careful not to think of them in extremely rigorous terms. The psalmists probably did not think of them at all. Often in the introduction to these various types, there is an anticipation of much of the entire psalm. Sometimes a lament psalm will anticipate the complaint and there will even be an element of trust and an element of petition. So we could call Psalm 30 a psalm of thanksgiving, but then here where it says, “Sing to the Lord, you saints of His, praise His holy name, for His anger lasts only a moment and His favor last a lifetime. Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning”—that sounds like a call to worship, does it not? It sounds like a hymn, so it does become sort of hymnic.

I made the comment that the psalmists probably did not think in terms of these categories. Would they have had other categories in mind that would have influenced how they wrote or what they wrote? Again, I have to be careful. I am not saying they were unaware of the different types of psalms. I am just not sure they would describe them in the way we do or insist that a certain type of psalm must have this element and that element and the other element. We are only, more or less, describing what we see. Returning to that verse I mentioned before (I think it is 1 Chronicles 16:4) where David appointed the Levites to give thanks, to bring to remembrance and to praise, that does seem to indicate that the activities of the psalmist correspond a little to different categories. There is the song of thanksgiving, laments, and thus the petitions could correspond to “bringing to remembrance,” and praise would be hymns. They may have had some sense of this, but we do not know for sure. I do not want people to think that they pulled out a manual or class notes and said that now they were going to write a lament.

Let us move on to Psalm 54. We will have occasion to come back. Remember Psalm 30 because we will come back to it eventually in connection with another discussion. Some people are saying that they classified Psalm 54 as a lament psalm; all right. What are the elements of a lament, just for review? They are address to God, complaint, confession of trust, petition, vow of praise—A-C-T-P-V is one way to remember that. And so you see verses 1 and 2 are the address, then the complaint is verse 3, trust is verse 4, verse 5 is petition, and verses 6 and 7 are the vow of praise. Here we have one that works out very nicely in order. Let me read it once and we will think of those. I will give them headings:

[Address:]

Save me, O God, by your name;
vindicate me by your might.
Hear my prayer, O God;
listen to the words of my mouth.

[Complaint:]

Strangers are attacking me;
ruthless men seek my life—
men without regard for God.

[Trust:]

Surely, God is my help;

the Lord is the one who sustains me.

[Petition:]

Let evil recoil on those who slander me;
in your faithfulness, destroy them.

[Vow of praise:]

I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you;
I will praise your name, O LORD, for it is good.
For He has delivered me from all my troubles
and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes.

Speaking in the past tense is probably a further expression of confidence. To say, “God has delivered me at this particular juncture,” when the psalmist still crying out to God to deliver him is an expression of trust.

Let us go to Psalm 56. Some of you have suggested that it is a lament. Let us examine the text and see if we find the elements of a lament. We expect the address to come first, and we can see verses 1 and 2 as the address. Verses 3 and 4 might be an expression of trust. Notice that address, complaint, trust is the order we learned, but that order is not sacrosanct. It does not have to be that way. In this psalm we find the address and then the trust.

In fact, let me read this one as we go along. Verses 1 and 2 are the address: “Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; / all day long they press their attack. / My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride.” Now, that is the address to God, but it also anticipates the complaint. We see a complaint already in the first couple of verses. This is followed by trust: “When I am afraid, / I will trust in you. / In God whose word I praise, / in God I trust; I will not be afraid. / What can mortal man do to me?” In verses 5 and 6 come the complaint: “All day long they twist my words; / they are always plotting to harm me. / They conspire, they lurk, / they watch my steps, / eager to take my life.” Next comes the petition in verses 7, 8 and 9: “On no account let them escape; / in your anger, O God, bring down the nations. / Record my lament.” Do you see how nicely it actually names the type of psalm? “Record my lament; / list my tears on your scroll. / Are they not in your record? / Then my enemies will turn back / when I call for help. / By this, I will know that God is for me.” We see the element of trust here. Certainly the line between these things is fluid, but there is trust there. In verse 10 we read something we have read before. That is a continuation of the trust and a repetition of verse 4, but it is a repetition with augmentation. It is good to notice when repeated matter is augmented or changed in some way. In verse 4 it was, “In God whose word I praise, / in God I trust.” Here, it is “In God whose word I praise, in the LORD”—Yahweh, the personal covenant name of God. This is not just God generic, but the LORD. In most English Bibles, it is “the LORD” in all capital letters. That is how you recognize this is God’s personal name, His covenant name. Then finally 12 and 14 are the vow of praise: “I am under vows to you, O God; / I will present my thank offerings to you. / For you have delivered me from death / and my feet from stumbling, / that I may walk before the Lord in the light of life.” Thus, to repeat these elements in order again, we have the address anticipating the complaint, and then in 3 and 4 we have trust, in 5 and 6 we see complaint, in 7 and 8 petition, in 9, 10, and 11 it goes back to trust, and then in 12 and 13 there is a vow of praise. Do you see all the elements? Some of them are duplicated; some of them are repeated a little, so there is some flexibility there and it can be more flexible than that still.

Let us turn to Psalm 113. Some of you have said this is a hymn. What do we expect to find in a hymn? What three elements? A call to worship, praise (in other words, motive for praise, what it is you are praising about God in terms of His general cosmic actions or His attributes) and then recapitulation.

Sometimes the recapitulation is as simple as “Praise the Lord.” The psalm might begin with, “Praise the Lord” and return to that “Praise the Lord” at the end. Let us see how many of these elements are in Psalm 113 and in what form we can find them. I will read the psalm: “Praise the LORD. / Praise, O servants of the LORD, / praise the name of the LORD. / Let the name of the LORD be praised / both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, / the name of the LORD is to be praised.” This is a call to worship. What kind of parallelism is that? It is repetitive or climatic parallelism. There are a number of different names invented to describe the same thing, but you see the building effect, the crescendo. That is the call to worship. Do you see the sharpening effect? “Let the name of the LORD be praised.” When? “Both now and forevermore.” Where? “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, / the name of the LORD is to be praised.” And who? It builds to that: “O servants of the LORD, / praise the name of the LORD.” After the call to worship, we expect to have the motive for praise. Listen to the motive for praise, because the whole purpose of analyzing these psalms is to cause us to observe, understand, and really hear what they are saying. I love this psalm in particular: “The LORD is exalted over all the nations; / His glory above the heavens.” Now, if we were speaking in theological categories, we would say this is about God’s transcendence. That is a good theological term. God is the wholly other. He is out there. He is above. He is exalted over the nations. His glory is above the heavens. However, notice this: “Who is like the LORD our God, / the One who sits enthroned on high, / who stoops to look down on the heavens and earth?” In this verse we immediately see God’s imminence. He is indeed exalted so much so that He has to stoop to look down on the heavens and then on the earth. And so the God who has transcended is also the God who is imminent. A lot of the theology of the psalms is not explicit theology. It does not speak in propositions, but rather in praise. There is a lot of wonderful theology in these psalms. Verse 7 goes on to say: “He raises the poor from the dust / and lifts the needy from the ash heap; / He sits them with princes, / with the princes of their people. / He settles the barren woman in her home / as a happy mother of children. / Praise the Lord.” It is interesting the way this psalm moves and the way it concludes. I remember when I was first reading Psalm 113 several years ago that I was struck by the way it becomes quite specific: “He settles the barren woman in her home / as a happy mother of children.” It is true that that is one instance of God lifting up someone in need, but why choose that particular one among all the others?

If you read Longman carefully, you might have noticed that he cross-referenced this psalm to the Song of Hannah. He suggested—I think a little casually—that the flow of influence might be from this psalm or a psalm like it to Hannah. In other words, Longman suggested that Hannah knew this psalm and perhaps was quoting it when she sang her song. I wonder if the flow of influence might be the reverse. Although this psalm does not have a superscription, so we do not know whether to associate it with David, it is certainly true that Hannah came before Samuel who came before Saul who came before David.

Look back at 1 Samuel, chapter 2 and compare that to Psalm 113, which says, “He raises the poor from the dust / and lifts the needy from the ash heap; / He sits them with princes, / with the princes of their people.” That is all perfectly appropriate in the context of Psalm 113, thinking of the way in which the transcendent God stoops down to view our need and is a God of mercy who lifts us in our need, who raises the poor from the dust and so forth. That does recall what we read back in 1 Samuel 2:8: “He raises the poor from the dust / and lifts the needy from the ash heap; / He seats them with princes / and has them inherit a throne of honor.” It is as if one of these was quoting the other. I would tend to think, unless I am missing something, that Psalm 113 was probably composed in the light of the Song of Hannah. Then of course the story of Hannah is triggered and so the psalmist goes on to say, “He settles the barren woman in her home / as a happy mother of children.” Look back at 1 Samuel 2:5b, the second half: “She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.” So you can see that you can almost feel what is going on in the psalmist’s mind as he thinks about the way

God stoops down to lift the needy and he is reminded of the words of Hannah. “He lifts the poor from the dust.” As he is reminded of her story, then he concludes with a reference to a barren woman, which otherwise would not seem to follow from what has come before. You see a little of what is sometimes called “intertextuality,” a little inner-biblical allusion to what I would regard probably as an earlier psalm.

A question I have gotten is “Where there is not a superscription, is there information elsewhere to know where to place the psalm and where to date it?” That leads beautifully to what we are going to talk about after the break. When we come back, I want us to think a little bit about that whole issue of superscriptions and about the orphan psalms that have no superscription.