

**Psalms, VIII**

In this lecture we will talk about the messianic psalms. But let me begin by talking about the theology of Psalms. One of the interesting things in Psalms and the wisdom books is we have men speaking to God—the cry of their souls speaking to God. This is distinct from the prophetic corpus or the law, where the direction of speech is from the Lord to man. Does that mean that this is somehow less inspired? It was man speaking to God, and as such is something we can learn from. We can use those words in our own prayers. But it is also God speaking to us. There are significant psalms of instruction, the Torah psalms, in several places in the Psalter. These include Psalms 1, 19, and 119. McCann asserts that the editors of the Psalter wanted readers to grasp the analogy between the Torah, the books of Moses, and the Psalter—thus, perhaps, the division into five books. The Psalter is to be read and heard as instruction to the faithful. It is man’s word to God in our distress from our circumstances in our laments and in our hymns, but it is also God’s instruction to us and something from which we can learn. In Psalms we do not have abstract, propositional theology, per se. This is not a systematic theology textbook. There is no philosophical theology in Psalms. However, that is not to say that the Psalms are not intentional and theological in import. They constitute what Peter Craigie calls, “popular theology,” in the best sense. This is the theology of people, the real life theology that comes out of their lives. He calls this “the theology of a profound knowledge of God, which emerges out of a life lived in relationship to God.” Craigie goes on to say that “The framework for all dimensions of that relationship with God is provided by the covenant.” Covenant is that bond between God and His people. Just as a marriage covenant, God enters into covenant with His people.

Attempts to summarize the theology of the Psalms will by definition somewhat detract from their immediacy and their emotive impact, so of course I will try and do that briefly. It is like trying to say, “Well, if you have never heard Handel’s *Messiah*, let me summarize its content for you.” That does not work too well. To try to summarize the theology of the Psalter, given its character, will seem very lame. Psalm 19 begins this way: “the heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they display knowledge.” If I then summarize, “God is revealed in the creation, especially in the heavenly bodies,” that is not the same. Let me just point you to a few things that are central and important.

Let us talk about the dominant themes in Psalms. What is central, theological, core belief of the Psalter? I believe at the very heart of the Psalter is simply that God is truly God. That sounds like a tautology, but I think sometimes we do not live as if God is truly God. The psalmist in his extremity—when he is being persecuted, when his attackers surround him—rather than attacking back, because he believes God is truly God, he goes to God. It is like he is saying, “You see what they are doing. Will You save me? Will You deal with them?” This is because he believes God is truly God. God is the supreme king. All of life is under His control and is to be lived out in complete obedience to Him. His Lordship extends to the life and circumstances of the psalmist, but also to the destinies of kings and nations, even to the whole of creation. For the psalmist, God is really God. I think if we could really let God be God in our lives, it would make a tremendous difference. What is there to worry about? If God, who is truly God, is for us, then what are we worried about? What can we truly be worried about if we believe that? This does not mean that we do not have times of trial and emotional times when we really want to pour out our hearts to God. But these circumstances do not crush us or send us into wrong reactions when we are believing God.

McCann says, “The theological heart of the Psalter is essentially the same as Jesus’ fundamental proclamation, “The Lord reigns.” The central affirmation is “God is king, the Lord reigns.” The first and greatest commandment, which is found in not only the Gospels but first in Deuteronomy 6:4, is this:

“Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one God and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The Hebrew text only has three of those things, but I think Jesus does a little exegesis, because the Hebrew word for heart means the mind and the heart. It does not mean simply the heart as the seat of emotions, nor simply the head in terms of the seat of the intellect. It is the core of one’s being. It involves the mind as well as the emotions. Jesus says four things and the Old Testament only says three. I am not making a serious theory that Jesus did exegesis because I do not know, but it is a possibility. What is the first and greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And if God is truly God, then that is the only response. What else would we do?

Many other themes flow from this. These are beautifully developed but they are not propositionally laid out as in a systematic theology book. They are beautifully developed in the Psalter. We see the transcendence and immanence of God in Psalm 111. We can also see the theme of God’s sovereignty in the Psalter. This is a dominant theme throughout the Old Testament and carrying on into the New Testament. But without the Old Testament I do not think we would have as firm a grasp of that central theological truth, that God is sovereign over creation and over all of history. Now He has chosen to exercise His sovereignty in justice, which is another theological focal point, and this is made clear in His condemnation of the proud and the wicked. We see this in Psalms. It shows that the proud and the wicked will be judged. But His mercy is also evident in His election of Israel. His mercy comes through just as clearly as His justice. He is a God of mercy. He elects Israel, the Davidic king, and the holy city of Jerusalem. He chooses Zion to be the place where His name dwells. By the way, I do not think it is wrong to say that we the church are now that holy city, that we the church are Mount Zion. I am not just spiritualizing things. I think the direction and the flow of the Old Testament is toward that conclusion. Another theme in Psalms is the covenant relationship. This is a reflection of God electing a people, choosing a people, and making them His own. We see His redemptive purpose in history clearly indicated in the Psalter and culminating in Jesus Christ. As we come to talk about the messianic psalms we need to remember that they are all messianic in a sense, because they are all about God and God is all about His redemptive purpose. And God’s redemptive purpose finds its full and complete fulfillment in Christ. Therefore, insofar as they talk about God and redemption, every psalm is talking about Christ. But is there a narrower sense in which we can talk about messianic psalms?

Are God’s redemptive acts on behalf of David typological? Do they point to the redemption that God works on our behalf? If Christ is the culmination of redemptive history, then in a broad sense any prophecy relating to God’s redemptive purposes can be classed as messianic. We are not here talking about messianic psalms as such. We are talking about messianic prophecy in a more general sense. There are four different kinds of messianic prophecy. But only the fourth is what some scholars would call “truly” messianic prophecy. Let us see what they mean.

First is soteriological prophecy. Soteriology has to do with salvation, and so soteriological prophecy would be something like Genesis 3:15, which speaks of the way in which the son of the woman will deal with the serpent. The son will crush the serpent’s head while the serpent will bruise his heel. That is talking about salvation, so that is classed as soteriological in this scheme. It is expressed as the general idea that God is working to save His people. There is no particular focus on the messiah, but it is more the general idea of salvation. The second type is eschatological prophecy. It may be taken as referring to the messianic age, which at the time of the Old Testament would lie in the future, though the messiah is not explicitly mentioned. It is prophecy looking toward the end of the ages when the messiah will reign. Another category of prophecies is apocalyptic prophecies. Apocalyptic is futuristic, unveiling, cataclysmic. It is the eruption or breaking in of God into the normal or historical chain of events. And finally we have messianic prophecy in a very narrow sense. According to this scheme, messianic

prophecy is only when the messiah is clearly in view and/or the messianic reign is described. Those instances are messianic prophecy in the narrow sense. But, to whom does it need to have been in view? At the time of the writing of that particular text, would the human author have had to have that in view? Or could we say the Holy Spirit had in view the way in which this particular prophecy would have messianic significance and messianic ramifications?

Having narrowed the field, we will now talk about this in a slightly different way. What are messianic psalms? There are two major types. If you think about the psalms, what are they likely to be? Well, who is the Messiah? He was the one who came to reign but first to suffer. Obviously those psalms that deal with the suffering servant of God are messianic in character. And also the royal psalms, which speak of kingship, will be quite naturally messianic.

Now we move, then, to categorize these and I think this is a helpful way to look at it. We will be looking at the specific example of Psalm 69. The first messianic element in this psalm is in verse four, "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy. I am forced to restore what I did not steal." That is quoted in John 15:5: "They hated me without reason." Then verse eight says, "I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons." Mark 23:1 is not a quotation, but it does seem to reflect a similar circumstance: "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" Verse nine says, "For zeal for your house consumes me and the insults of those who insult you fall on me." That is quoted in John 2:17: "His disciples remembered, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" This is a clear quotation of this particular psalm. Psalm 69:21 says, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." This is quoted many times in the passion narratives of the Gospel. Matthew 27:34 is one example. Mark, Luke, and John all also quote this particular element of the psalm. Thus we are clearly dealing with a messianic psalm. The New Testament authors really mined these psalms for those elements.

Psalm 69:22 brings up another set of questions. What was Jesus' attitude from the cross? Forgiveness: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." But verse 22 says:

May the table set before them become a snare;  
may it become retribution and a trap.  
May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see,  
and their backs be bent forever.  
Pour out your wrath on them;  
let your fierce anger overtake them.  
May their place be deserted;  
let there be no one to dwell in their tents.  
For they persecute those you wound  
and talk about the pain of those you hurt.  
Charge them with crime upon crime;  
do not let them share in your salvation.  
May they be blotted out of the book of life  
and not be listed with the righteous.

This does not seem to reflect Christ's sentiment on the cross. What are we dealing with here? Let me give you three categories of messianic psalms. The first is the one in which this kind of psalm belongs. These I would title "typological messianic psalms." Typology is the study of types. There are two principles involved in typology. Think of these two terms: correspondence and escalation. Typology

assumes divine sovereignty in history. It is not historicism. Historicism is a term used for many different things. One use of the term is for the view that there are specific historical laws that can be discovered, sort of like natural laws, upon which predictions about the future can be based. I am not talking about that. Very often, God's sovereign control of history is clear only in retrospect. Typology has to do with something that happens in history that finds correspondence to something else that happens in history later on, but is its anti-type (that which comes last), represents an escalation in a sense. It is a higher fulfillment. A fine biblical example of a type is the reference to the serpent that Moses raised up in the wilderness. Those who were sick and dying, having been bitten by serpents, who looked to it were healed. This is used in the Old Testament as a type for Christ who Himself would be lifted up, and those who look to Him in faith will be healed—those who are otherwise dying. God orchestrated history in such a way so as to establish a pattern, which could then be used as an image for what Christ actually accomplished in history. Often the way in which the New Testament authors understand and interpret the Old Testament is in this typological sense. This is the most common understanding of the Old Testament that you find in the New Testament. In Psalm 69, which we have just been looking at, David recognizes his foolishness and his sin. So we would not say that this psalm is purely and exclusively about Christ. But, as we also noted, this psalm is quoted a number of times as referring to Christ and being fulfilled in Christ. We highlighted a number of these instances.

Typology assumes divine sovereignty in history. God is in control of history, and He builds into earlier historical periods patterns that then serve to explain and help us understand other things that happen in later periods of history. Another example is Psalm 41, which is also seen as a typological messianic psalm. You could read right through this psalm and not find much that would sound very messianic. In fact, in verse four the psalmist says, "I said, 'Oh Lord, have mercy on me, for I have sinned against you.'" The psalmist is saying, "I have sinned." But then in verse nine the psalmist says, "Even my close friend whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." That is quoted in Matthew 26:14-16 as being fulfilled in the life of Christ. Thus there is a verse from Psalm 41 that is fulfilled in the life of Christ, but not all of Psalm 41 pertains to Christ necessarily. The psalm has an immediate fulfillment in the life of the psalmist, but it also establishes a pattern that corresponds to something that happened to Christ in an escalated fashion. This is a typological messianic prophecy. It is very important to understand typology if we are to understand the nature of prophecy.