



Summary of Psalms 73-89

Psalm 73 - A Psalm of Asaph.

This is a wisdom psalm, helping those who sing it to rest content even when unbelievers seem to get along without a care in the world so that the faithful are tempted to join them. Their help comes from taking to heart where the different life paths of the faithful and the unbelievers are headed: each one is going toward either nearness to God or separation from him, a nearness or separation that will apply both now and in the afterlife. Psalm 73 is thus a companion to Psalm 49. The singer remembers that he discerned these different destinations while he was in the sanctuary of God, namely, at public worship, which points the congregation to what they should look for as they worship.

This wonderful psalm may be best understood by the dominant pronouns within. When Asaph is troubled by the fate of the ungodly (vv.1-12) the dominant pronoun is 'they'. When he describes his own frustrated thinking leading to the resolution (vv.13-17) the dominant pronoun is 'I'. When he finds resolution of the problem (vv.18-22) the dominant pronoun is 'You', in the sense of God. When he proclaims the assurance of his faith and fellowship with God (vv.23-28) the dominant pronouns are a mixture of 'You' and 'I'.

Psalm 74 - A Maskil of Asaph.

This psalm is a cry of anguish over a disaster that has befallen God's people; the temple has been laid to ruin and quite possibly prophesies the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Thus this is a community lament resembling Psalm 79 in tone. In distinction from Psalm 79, however, the guilt of the covenant people does not come into view in this psalm. Of course, that does not deny that the disaster is a judgement on their unfaithfulness. Some community laments deal with situations for which the guilt of the people is not the explanation, e.g. Psalm 44 and possibly Psalm 77. Psalm 74, like Psalm 77, recounts God's mighty deeds in the past,

especially the exodus; here that recounting serves as a ground for the prayer: do not let the Gentiles scorn the God who has done such things.

Psalm 75 - To the leader: Do Not Destroy. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

This is a hymn of praise, thanking God for the wondrous deeds he has done for Israel, and celebrating the fact that he is the judge of all the earth and will, in his own time, put down the wicked and lift up the faithful. There is no indication of a specific occasion for which someone wrote this psalm or the congregation sang it, but this is not surprising; its lesson of faith - God's sovereign rule that this psalm celebrates is often invisible - is needful at all times.

Psalm 76 - To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

This is a hymn celebrating Zion as the place God has chosen to dwell and the capital of the people he has chosen to bless and protect; it is a companion to Psalms 46, 48, 87 and 122. The psalm is suited to an occasion in which God has delivered Zion from invaders. The congregation that sings this will marvel at the privilege of going to Zion and worshipping there, and will thank God for it.

Psalm 77 - To the leader: according to Jeduthun. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

This is a community lament, suitable to a time when the people of God are in a low condition. The description of the low condition is general enough that the psalm cannot be tied to any specific occasion. The psalm acknowledges that the reason for the trouble may be some fault in the people: to refer to God's anger (v.9) raises the question of whether his people's unfaithfulness provoked it; hence this is like Psalms 74, 79 and 80 in their recognition of this factor. Psalm 44, on the other hand, is a community lament suited to an occasion in which the community's unfaithfulness is not the cause of its trouble.

That this is a community lament is clear from the nature of the appeal in vv.10-20: <<**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old**>> (v.11) refer to ancient times in which God redeemed his people (v.15) and led them like a flock (v.20). Thus the emphasis is on the condition of God's people as a body; but this corporate focus is certainly not impersonal. Each person singing this owns his or her membership in the people, and acknowledges that his or her well-being is bound up with the well-being of the whole: <<**I cry aloud to God**>> (v.1), <<**the day of my trouble**>> (v.2), and: <<**I am so troubled**>> (v.4).

The Bible presents the individual as a member of the community and encourages each member to seek the good of the whole. The repeated key words here are 'remember' and 'meditate,' both of which appear in each of the main sections. The psalm moves from remembering and meditating on God as the one who has made promises to his people, to remembering and meditating on how things once

were better, to remembering and meditating on God's mighty deeds of old that build confidence for his people's future.

Psalm 78 - A Maskil of Asaph.

This is a 'historical psalm' (as are Psalms 105 and 106) recounting events from Israel's past that show how God persevered with his people, even when they disbelieved, while at the same time he cleansed his people by purging them of the unbelievers along the way. The psalm has selected events primarily from the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges and Samuel, ending with the reign of David. The psalm is clear about its purpose: to recount these events in song so that future generations of God's people might take the lessons to heart, particularly that they not be unbelieving and rebellious like the generations described here. The emphasis is on the people as a whole and the members' obligation to embrace the covenant faithfully in each generation. Terms for 'remember' and 'forget' run through the psalm; the psalmist hopes that those who sing this will never again forget.

The psalm opens with its purpose statement (vv.1-8), followed by several episodes of sin and unbelief, each new section beginning with 'they sinned' or 'they rebelled' (v.17, v.32, v.40 and v.56), followed by a final section on God's gift of David as the pinnacle expression of his enduring commitment (vv.65-72).

Christians will of course see the final section on David as important: Jesus is David's heir and the One who now occupies his throne. At the same time, they should not overlook God's patient preservation of his people, the descendants of Abraham – the people into which God has grafted Gentile Christians. Christians may properly see themselves as the beneficiaries of God's patience: without it, there would be no people for them to be part of! And God will continue his purposes for his people until the very end.

Psalm 79 - A Psalm of Asaph.

This is a community lament, which was occasioned by a great disaster that fell upon Jerusalem, possibly the Babylonian destruction, and has many similarities to Psalm 74. It recounts the violence and impiety of the Gentile conquerors and asks God how long he intends to put up with such things. Running through the psalm is a recognition that, just as by reason of the covenant, Israel expects God to treat them differently than he treats the other nations, so too Israel should live faithfully to that covenant. The disaster came because Israel did not embrace the covenant in true faith; the psalm confesses that, asks for forgiveness and pledges renewed faithfulness.

Psalm 80 - To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

This is a community lament geared to a situation in which the people, or at least a part of them, have received hard treatment from the Gentiles; it poignantly asks God to <<*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved*>> (v.3). The specific tribes mentioned are Joseph with his sons Ephraim and Manasseh and Benjamin (vv.1-2), namely, the two sons of Jacob's wife Rachel. Some have taken this to indicate that the psalm came from the northern kingdom but Benjamin remained with Judah at the breakup of the kingdom: <<*When Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled all the house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, one hundred and eighty thousand chosen troops to fight against the house of Israel, to restore the kingdom to Rehoboam son of Solomon*>> (1 Kings 12:21). Further, when v.1 speaks of the Lord as 'enthroned upon the cherubim' it is describing his place at the ark, in the Jerusalem temple. Thus it is more likely that these tribes are mentioned as a part of the whole people, and the whole congregation owns the distress of the part exercised on a corporate level: <<*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*>> (Romans 12:15).

Psalm 81 - To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of Asaph.

It is not easy to put this psalm in a category; it actually resembles the oracles of the OT prophets; perhaps it is therefore best to think of it as a prophetic hymn. Prediction is not the primary function of the OT prophets, any more than it is of this psalm: rather, their goal is to challenge God's people to covenant faithfulness, speaking to them of covenant blessings or punishments that will come, depending on their response.

This psalm reviews the basic history of the covenant using the Pentateuch, charges Israel with unfaithfulness, and urges them to embrace the covenant – then God would subdue Israel's enemies. Verse 2 refers to the trumpet at the new moon and at the full moon. This may well indicate that the psalm was suited to the Festival of Trumpets that was held on the first day of the seventh month and at the new moon; and the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles held on the 15th day of the same month, when the moon was full, with the solemnity of the Day of Atonement in between them; refer to Leviticus 23:23-36. Certainly the overall theme of the psalm fits this setting.

Psalm 82 - A Psalm of Asaph.

Some call this a community lament since it addresses God directly with a request on behalf of the whole people. Others call it a prophetic hymn like Psalm 81, interpreting its address to the 'gods' (v.6) as directed to unjust human rulers, whom God will judge. Both of these classifications have merit, which shows that

one must use the psalm categories only as a rule of thumb, because the psalms do not always fit neatly in only one category.

Singing this psalm should enable the faithful, many of whom were socially weak and lowly in Israel, as was often the case with the early Christians as well: **<<Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God>>** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29), to take courage in the face of unjust rule, so that they do not yield to the ever-present temptation to cooperate with the injustices of their wicked rulers. Even the most powerful rulers must die and face God's final judgement. The song should also help those who hold social and political power to use that power in service to others, especially to protect those who are easiest to exploit. The people of God are called to aspire to be an ideal society, with their justice visible to all peoples, that all nations might come to know the true God: **<<See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!' For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?>>** (Deuteronomy 4:5-8); Christians are called to the same aspiration for their own present society. They must also testify about God's justice to their wider culture, since, as Proverbs 31:1-9 shows, this kind of justice is applicable to all mankind; this is what properly functioning human nature looks like everywhere.

Psalm 83 - A Song. A Psalm of Asaph.

This is a community lament, geared to a situation in which God's people are threatened by Gentile enemies who aim to destroy them. The psalm prays that God will make such enemies fail miserably, being put to shame and perishing – so that they might come to know the Lord. It is possible that the psalm assumes that Israel must defend themselves and the prayer is for military victory. Christians would use this psalm not against 'national enemies' since the Christian faith transcends national boundaries but in cases where their persecutors would destroy them and all traces of their faith. They use this prayer rightly when they ask God to thwart these plans in such a way that even the persecutors might come to seek God's name.

Psalm 84 - To the leader: according to The Gittith. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

This is a psalm celebrating pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to worship at the temple. It is very much like the hymns in praise of Zion as God's special place such as Psalm 122, although this one especially focuses on the delight of going to worship there. The purpose of singing this psalm is to cultivate that delight, to open the eyes and hearts of God's people to the staggering privilege of being a welcome guest in God's own house, and to write deep into their souls the conviction that wickedness offers no reward that can even remotely compare to the joy and pleasure of God's house.

The psalm most likely comes from a time when the sanctuary was located in Zion, and when a king ruled and protected the pilgrims: he is called the anointed, and is probably from David's line, although even Saul was called 'the Lord's anointed' in 1 Samuel 24:6; however, Saul was a poor protector of the sanctuary and its personnel; refer to 1 Samuel 22:6-19. The psalm has three parts, in each of which people are pronounced 'happy' or 'blessed'.

Psalm 85 - To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

This is a community lament, at a time when God has shown his displeasure over his people's unfaithfulness, perhaps by withholding fruitfulness from the land. The people singing this are seeking forgiveness for the whole people, asking God to show the steadfast love and faithfulness he proclaimed in Exodus 34:6; and because God is righteous – that is, reliable about his promises – the psalm closes with confidence.

Exodus 34:6-7 provides the background to this psalm, particularly in the terms steadfast love and faithfulness and to forgive iniquity. The Lord explained his 'name' to Moses by emphasising his benevolence, which is where the people's hope lies. Many churches use the psalm at Christmas time, the supreme occasion when God was favourable to his land and spoke peace to his saints.

Psalm 86 - A Prayer of David.

This is an individual lament, geared (as many of these laments are) to a situation in which <<***a band of ruffians seeks my life***>> (v.14). The psalm confesses that the Lord is good and forgiving (v.5), acknowledging that the singer's own sins may have contributed to his enemies' plans.

The psalmist explicitly grounds his request in Exodus 34:6, a fundamental confessional statement of the OT as seen in Psalm 86:15; David also prays for a united heart to live faithfully to God (v.11). The middle of the psalm strikingly professes faith in one God, to whom all nations shall come (vv.8-10) – another vital OT theme.

Psalm 87 - Of the Korahites. A Psalm. A Song.

This is a psalm celebrating Zion as the chosen city of God; it looks forward to people of all nations – even nations that have been enemies to Israel – becoming citizens of this city, carrying forward the ideas of Psalm 86:9. This brief song provided themes for the Christian hymn, “Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God.”

Psalm 88 - A Song. A Psalm of the Korahites. To the leader: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

This is an individual lament, suited for a person who is so overwhelmed with troubles that even his friends shun him, and who wrestles with the dread that comes from suspecting that the Lord has shunned him as well. The psalm does not specify the troubles, only that they feel like expressions of God’s relentless wrath; this allows the psalm to be used by the faithful for a wide variety of hardships.

Most laments let in a ray of sunshine, usually closing on a confident note; Psalm 88 is distinct from all the rest in that there is no explicit statement of confidence. There is an implicit confidence, however, in v.6 and v.14: the song confesses that it is God who has brought these troubles, implying that relief is also in God’s hand. Further, there is insistent appeal to God; the psalm instils a tough faith in its singers by reminding them to keep turning to God, even during these times when it seems that there is no answer being given. The experiences of Job provide a good example of this kind of suffering. Sickness, bereavement, and persecution can easily lead to such distress. Since Psalm 88 is in the canonical Psalms, the faith of this psalm cannot be separated from the faith expressed in the rest of the book, and it helps its singers to see that faith can be real, even when it cannot arrive at strong hope after prayer. Those without such problems may pray this psalm on behalf of those suffering.

Psalm 89 - A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

This is a community lament, but with a distinctive flavour: it celebrates the Davidic kingship as a special gift of God’s love to his people, and mourns the distress into which the people have fallen, interpreting that distress as God’s wrath against his anointed, i.e. the king in the line of David. For the people to sing this faithfully is for them to choose as their own the way that God has chosen to administer his people, accepting that the covenant with David, as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8-16, defines the heir of David as the divinely appointed representative for God’s people, whose task is to lead them in faithfulness. Owning this arrangement, they pray earnestly for God to bless his people through blessing the Davidic king with wisdom, goodness, and might.

This psalm is for those who acknowledge the house of David as their legitimate ruler, i.e. for the united kingdom under David and Solomon, and for Judah after

the division. The prophets also instructed the people of the northern kingdom that their hope lay with David's house: <<***Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days***>> (Hosea 3:5), and: <<***On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old***>> (Amos 9:11). Crises during this period, including the exile to Babylon, would have been suitable occasions to sing this psalm. Christians sing this too, recognising that, in Jesus, God has kept his promises to David, forcefully displaying his steadfast love and faithfulness. Under no circumstances will God ever reject Jesus; and even though God may be displeased with his people, and chastise them, he will not allow their mission to fail. As this psalm reassured God's people of old, so it reassures Christians that God's steadfast love and faithfulness are a solid foundation for the promise to David, even when it feels like God has abandoned that promise.