

The Wisdom Literature

Lesson #10

Instructional Psalms

Introduction

- Rather than study the psalms sequentially from 1-150, our study has examined groupings of the psalms, the similarity of which seem natural to most students of the book. Various psalms deal with the same general theme and are thus grouped together. We have studied five of these groups: psalms of God, psalms of praise, psalms of repentance, psalms of the word of God and the Messianic psalms. We have not studied all of the psalms, nor even all of the many groupings of the psalms. Our intention has been to create within the heart of each student a hunger for a deeper and more complete study of these marvelous songs of Israel and to give you a basic framework for that study.
- The apostle Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). Both in ancient times and today singing has an instructional value.
- Lyrics are written, ideas are expressed and truth is taught by setting words to music. Sometimes these truths are more quickly received into the heart by means of song than by any other teaching method. All psalms are "instructional" in nature.
- Therefore, to talk about a grouping of "instructional" psalms in that sense could be to talk about all psalms. However, most teachers do set aside certain psalms they style as "instructional" and the psalms included in that group are usually merely a matter of that teacher's choice. In this lesson we will follow that pattern to study three of the psalms (1, 49, 73) which teach important lessons.

Psalm 1

- Psalm 1 contrasts the blessed state of a righteous life with the judgment of God that comes upon the wicked. The word blessed means "happy." Most people want to live happy lives. We loathe misery and pain. However, the story of man is the story of looking for happiness in all of the wrong places. We need to let God define happiness and tell us where it is found.
- The blessed or happy man is a man who is separated from the world; he avoids three places.
 - He cannot "walk in the counsel of the ungodly."
 - He cannot "stand in the path of sinners."
 - He cannot "sit in the seat of scoffers."

- The psalmist indirectly warns of the progression of sin. First, a man listens to the ungodly. Second, he finds himself in the constant company of sinners. Third, he participates in their ridicule of righteous acts and righteous people -- ultimately sneering at God Himself. A man simply cannot enjoy a blessed life and engage in such behavior.
- The blessed man finds happiness because he is saturated with the word of God. One, "his delight is in the law of the Lord" (1:2; 119:97). The happy man has an affection for God's law. It is his rule of life. Two, "in his law he meditates day and night" (1:2). The people God blesses not only read the word daily, but they study it, memorize it and meditate on it during the day and night. Their mind is controlled by the word of God. Meditation is to the soul what "digestion" is to the body. It means understanding the word, "chewing on it," and applying it to our lives making it become a part of the inner person (Jeremiah 15:16; cf. Deuteronomy 6:7-9; 2 Timothy 2:15; 1 Timothy 4:13, 15).
- The man who molds his character by such close adherence to the word of God is a blessed, happy man. He is like a "tree planted by the rivers of water" (vs. 3) -- strong, permanent, beautiful, useful and fruitful. There are three important results.
 - He is fruitful (cf. John 15:1-8, 16).
 - He does not "wither" in threatening weather (cf. James 1:2-4).
 - He prospers in whatever he does (cf. John 10:10; 3 John 2).
- The ungodly are compared to chaff -- useless; they have no roots; they are neither beautiful nor fruitful. John the Baptist used a similar picture in Matthew 3:10-12 when he described God as a harvester, visiting the threshing floor, separating the grain from the chaff and then burning the chaff.
- Psalm 1:5 is one of the few allusions to the final judgment in the Old Testament. It is not until the New Testament is revealed that we are given a fuller explanation of the events of the end. However, the psalmist clearly recognized that all men must stand before God in judgment (cf. Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Psalm 49

- The foolishness of trusting in riches and material possessions is a theme that is addressed throughout the scripture. It is a major theme in Jesus' teaching (Matthew 6:19-34; 19:16-22; Luke 12:13-21) as well as that of His apostles (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19). In this psalm, the sons of Korah set this theme to music.
 - A call to hear (vss. 1-4). The call to hear these words of wisdom is a universal call -- to the famous socialite and the obscure ditch-digger, the wealthy and the poor -- it is a message for everyone.

- No reason to fear (vss. 5-6). The author saw no reason to fear even though wealthy and ambitious foes surrounded him. Their trust was in the wrong object: wealth instead of God.
- Riches will not save a person's life (vss. 7, 9). Material wealth cannot spare a man from death and the grave. No man, no matter how wealthy he may be, can spare another from this inevitable interview with God (Hebrews 9:27).
- Riches cannot be used as a ransom before God (vs. 7). God cannot be bribed or paid in any material way to save a person's life (Deuteronomy 10:17).
- Riches will not save a person's soul (vs. 8). This verse seems to look beyond physical life to contemplate the soul's destiny. If riches cannot buy an extension to physical life, they certainly cannot redeem a man from sin. Redemption from the penalty of sin comes by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-10).
- Mistaken materialistic thinking (vss. 10-12, 16-18). Men have the tendency to mistakenly think that "their houses shall continue for ever." This was the mistake of the rich man of Luke 12:17-20. When you die, you will "carry nothing away" (vs. 17; cf. 1 Timothy 6:7). Such mistaken thinking leads men to put their trust in possessions rather than in God. When death comes or when our possessions rot or are stolen (Matthew 6:19-21), where or to whom can man turn? Only to God (Matthew 6:33).
- While men live upon the earth they are congratulated for their financial success. Men praise you when you have done well in business. What happens when the money you earned is lost or your business fails? What happens at death when your money has lost its ability to meet your needs and it is left to another? What happens to you when you have put your trust in materialism and not in God? Many have forgotten God as they climbed the ladder of success only to get to the top and realize that their ladder was leaning against the wrong building (vss. 13-15, 19-20).
- Those who trust in riches are like sheep appointed for Sheol with death as their shepherd (vs. 14). However, God redeems the righteous from the power of the grave (vss. 14-15; cf. John 5:28-29). Those who search for riches will "never see the light" and are "like the beasts that perish" (vss. 19-20).

Psalm 73

- One of the first points that even a casual reader of the Bible comes to understand is that God expects His people to live differently from the world (Titus 2:11-12; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). This is often very difficult to do for two reasons. First, because of the enticements of the world.

Satan can make the world of ungodly possessions look very attractive. Second, because of the pressure placed upon Christians to conform, Christians are thought to be "odd" and are often maligned or persecuted when we refuse to act like the world (cf. 1 Peter 4:3-4; 1 Timothy 4:12).

- When the world is made to look so good and God's people face pressure and even persecution it is only natural that someone ask, "Is it worthwhile to live godly?" When the wicked prosper and I suffer, is righteousness the right course to pursue?
- Psalm 73 is a psalm attributed to the writing of a man named Asaph. One thousand years before Christ came into the world, this obscure psalmist faced and reasoned through the same dilemma that we face 3,000 years later. Not much has changed. The wicked still prosper. The righteous still hurt. Good people still ask, "Is it worth it?" This psalm is valuable for its candid admissions and its powerful reasoning.
 - Viewing the wicked with envy (vss. 3-9). A common mistake made by otherwise righteous people is that of developing a warped perspective. Asaph allowed his heart to be filled with envy when he looked at the lives of the wicked around him. He saw the wicked as always in good health while never seeming to suffer (vs. 4). Asaph did not see any burdens or calamities befalling the ungodly (vs. 5). In his eyes (at least for the moment), the world of the unrighteous was filled with arrogance and rebellion (vss. 6-7) and worse, they seemed to be getting by with it without punishment (vss. 8-9, 12).
 - The plight of the righteous (vss. 10-13). God's people, on the other hand, "return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them" (literally, "their tears are drained out of them"). They have hurt, they have cried and they have shed tears until there are no more tears to shed. From the least to the greatest among them they wondered, "Does God know what is going on in our lives? Does He see the hurt? Does He understand our pain? How long, O Lord, must it go on like this?" (cf. Revelation 6:10). Have we kept our heart pure for nothing? Have we sacrificed to live godly lives in vain? Is justice just a meaningless word?
 - A serious problem (vss. 2, 16). Sometimes we are prone to give trite answers to tough questions. Is it worthwhile to live godly? "Sure it is," we answer quickly (just as long as we are not the one that is hurting)! However, to Asaph and to everyone who is in pain, sometimes this question is not so easily answered. Asaph labored to understand why events were happening as they were and he was coming up with no simple solutions. It was a troubling question and he did not like some of the answers. He came very close to giving up on God!

- A new perspective (vss. 16-20). He came close to giving up on God that is, "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end" (vs. 17). Do not read over that too quickly. Did you notice where he gained a proper perspective? It was in the sanctuary of God! Please remember that you are not going to get an accurate picture from the world of sin and evil. The devil is a liar and the father of lies and liars (John 8:44). He makes promises he cannot keep and offers gifts he cannot give. Only in the company of God and godly people can you see the world and its events in proper perspective (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:33). Asaph "understood their end" (vs. 17). He got a clear picture at what was truly going to happen to the world of the ungodly. God despised them and would bring them to destruction!
- Count your many blessings (vss. 21-24). After seeing what would happen to the ungodly, Asaph began to look at the blessings God had given to him.
 - The presence of God (vs. 23).
 - The protection of God's right hand (vs. 23).
 - The guidance of God's counsel (vs. 24).
 - The reward of glory (vs. 24).
- A renewed commitment (vss. 25-28). Asaph came to realize that it was worthwhile to live godly.
- Is it worthwhile to live godly? "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart" (vs. 1). Even though the wicked sometimes prosper and they fill their lives with the gratification of the flesh, it is still worthwhile to be godly and to keep ourselves apart from their wicked deed. Even though, as righteous, you are sometimes called strange and viewed as odd, maybe even persecuted, it is still worthwhile to live godly!
- Remember the song: "Often I'm hindered on life's way, burdened so heavy I almost fall; Then I hear Jesus sweetly say, 'Heaven will surely be worth it all.' Many the trials, toils and tears, many a heartache may here appall; but the dear Lord so truly says, 'Heaven will surely be worth it all.' Toiling and pain I will endure, till I shall hear the death angel call; Jesus has promised and I'm sure, Heaven will surely be worth it all. Heaven will surely be worth it all, worth all the sorrows that here befall; After this life with all its strife, Heaven will surely be worth it all."

Conclusion

- Psalms teach. In fact, the psalms sometimes grapple with the hard issues of life. Issues like pain and suffering, the definition of righteousness, etc.

- These lessons we have studied, as well as many others we have not covered, need to be learned. The psalms, perhaps as much or more than any other book, help bring us closer to God.