
Bible Study for January 23, 2019
The Wisdom Psalms

Wisdom Psalms: These instructive psalms provide practical guidelines for godly living and give direction for righteous living in the pursuit of God's will. Different scholars will put different groups of psalms in this list. Some general wisdom Psalms are 1, 32, 37, 49, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133. These are psalms that reflect on wisdom, on the fate of the righteous and the wicked, and on the Law. They are distinguished by their reflective, meditative tone, and their didactic character. That these psalms lack much of a reference to temple worship gives us an indication that they are later in history of Judaism.

Discussion:

1. These psalms seek to answer:
"How should a good man live before God?" and to answer the question of theodicy, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" That is, if God is sovereign over all, why does He allow the wicked to prosper and escape penalties, while godly souls are denied success and happiness?

1. What is Wisdom?

The wisdom books in the Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth, Job, and the deuterocanonical books of Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon) are so called because the word "wisdom" occurs frequently in them. They are distinctive in the Bible because they contain very little narrative. Wisdom writings are thought to have originated in the training of scribes for service at the royal court. The Psalmist defines the wise as those who seek after God. The fools say in their heart "there is no God." The pattern of restoration in the wisdom tradition is a return to the ideals of creation that were ruined by the fall of Adam and Eve. These psalms discuss the fruit of wisdom, and the blessings that flow from a fear of the Lord which is regarded as the beginning of wisdom. Psalm 128, for example, speaks of the blessings that follow from the fear of the Lord not in terms of wealth but rather in terms of family: your children will be like olive shoots around your table, and you will see your children's children.

2. Teaching, an identifier of wisdom.

If you look at some proverbs, or what is identified as wisdom in the psalms, it is often labeled as 'didactic' or 'teaching.' That is because it tells you how things are or ought to be and uses the language of instruction to do so. Look at Psa 34: 11-22. The psalm tells his hearer that he is going to 'teach' him, vs. 11. In vs. 12 he reveals the consequence of listening to this teaching - if you love life and desire to see good days, and in the rest of the verses gives the pathway one has to take to achieve that. Well, that is wisdom instruction, giving both the way and the consequence of fearing the Lord. The wisdom psalms themselves can be divided into three sub-categories: experience, character and ethical psalms.

1. Experience or Proverbial Psalms - These are concise and expressive sayings of experience.
(cf. Psalm 49: 1-4; 78: 1-4; 133)

2. Character Psalms - These are similar to "Experience" psalms but written in a different style (usually longer). They often strive to answer the question, "How should a good man live before God?" (cf. Psalm 1 and 15)

3. Ethical Psalms - A third type of wisdom psalm is the "ethical" psalm. These deal with the deeper problems of religion and ethics. (cf. Psalm 49 for example asks the question, "If God is sovereign over all, why does He allow the wicked to prosper and escape penalties, while godly souls are denied success and happiness?" Psalm 37 is perhaps the most famous reflection on the respective fates of the righteous and the wicked. Characteristically, the Psalmist begins by assuring his listeners that the wicked will soon fade like grass. He urges people to be patient. Psalm 73 is exceptional in the Psalter insofar as it admits the problem:

I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Consequently, the Psalmist was embittered, and "like a brute beast." He claims to have overcome his doubts when he went into the sanctuary of God. His transformation is a matter of trust in the presence of God.