

THE PSALMS

THE GENRES OF THE PSALMS

1. Genre is a word we use to identify certain types or categories of things which have the same characteristics within a wider or more general classification. Books, music, films all have their own genres. Books: Fiction – crime, sci-fi, fantasy, romance; and Non-fiction - history, biography, travel, science. Music – classical, pop, heavy metal, rap, soul. Films – comedy, westerns, period dramas, horror, war, documentary, animation. If we know what the genre is then we have a certain expectation or understanding of what we shall experience when we read the book, listen to the music, or watch the film. Just as we can identify genres in these other areas, so the Bible is a book which contains many different types or genres of literature: e.g. history, letters, law codes, prophecy, apocalyptic, wisdom and poetry. To correctly understand what we are reading we need to identify the genre. All the Psalms are in the genre of poetry. But within the genre of poetry we can identify seven different genres or types of Psalms. The psalms within each group display certain similar characteristics, phrases, and structure. The two primary genres of the Psalms are:

- i) Hymns
- ii) Laments

Other genres are:

- iii) Psalms of thanksgiving
- iv) Psalms of remembrance
- v) Psalms of confidence
- vi) Wisdom psalms
- vii) Kingship or royal psalms

This list is taken from Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, IVP, 1988. Other writers may use slightly different categories. Identifying the genre will help our understanding and interpretation of the text we are studying.

3. **The Hymns**

The Psalms identified as hymns are characterised by their expressions of praise to God. The people are summoned to praise and worship God. The Psalm will also provide the reasons or motives for wanting to praise God. These may be for His covenant and deeds

carried out on behalf of Israel, for His acts as Creator, for His attributes of mercy, justice, wisdom and love.

Examples of Psalms which are hymns are found in **Psalms 111-113**. The whole group of Psalms from **Psalm 111-118** are called The Hallel (*Hallelu-Yah* – Praise Yahweh).

The basic structure of a hymn is:

- i) A call to worship/praise God.
- ii) The reasons why God should be praised.
- iii) A reiteration of the call to worship.

An example: **Psalm 113**

- i) The call to worship – **v.1-4**
- ii) The reason to praise God – **v.5-9a** – for His treatment of the poor and barren.
- iii) The call to praise repeated – **v.9b**.

4. **The Laments**

In the laments the Psalmist is struggling with some overwhelming problem. The Psalmist calls upon God to help in time of distress. There are about 50 Psalms which can be identified as laments.

The basic structure of the lament:

- i) The invocation – God is called upon to help. E.g. **Psalm 74:1; 12:1**
- ii) The description of the psalmist's suffering or distress. May be caused by his enemies, guilt, ill-health. E.g. **Psalm 51:3; 3:1-2**.
- iii) The petition for help. The help requested may be salvation, restoration, deliverance. E.g. **Psalm 3:7; 17:6; 51:1-2,10-12**
- iv) The reasons why God should help: His justice, His past actions, for His own glory. E.g. **Psalm 61:3**
- v) A promise of thanks for help received. E.g. **Psalm 56:12-13; 57:9-10**
- vi) An expression of confidence that God has heard and will answer. **Psalm 54:7**.

Some laments also include an imprecation or cursing of the psalmist's enemies. E.g. **Psalm 59:11-13; Psalm 137:8-9**.

Some of the laments can be called penitential psalms. In these the psalmist confesses his sins to God and seeks forgiveness. Examples: **Psalm 32; 51**.

The laments may be individual laments in which the psalmist addresses God about his own personal circumstances, or they can be corporate laments in which a situation affecting the

whole nation or community is brought before God. An example of an individual lament is found in **Psalm 57**. An example of a corporate lament is found in **Psalm 74**.

5. **Psalms of Thanksgiving**

In these Psalms God is thanked for answering prayers or thanked in anticipation of His answer to prayers. Psalms of thanksgiving may be regarded as a sub-genre of the hymns as they are essentially expressions of praise to God.

The basic structure of the psalm of thanksgiving:

- i) The proclamation: “I will give thanks” – E.g. Psalm 118:1; 105:1.
- ii) The invocation - God is called upon – E.g. Psalm 116:1-4.
- iii) The narrative – a review of the sufferer’s distress – E.g. Psalm 116:3,5-7,8
- iv) The expression of praise and gratitude – E.g. Psalm 116:12-19.

6. **Psalms of Remembrance**

In these Psalms the psalmist recalls God’s past acts of redemption and salvation such as the exodus and His covenant with David.

Remembering these past acts causes Israel to praise God in the present.

Examples: Psalms 77:11-20; Psalm 78; Psalm 105.

7. **Psalms of Confidence**

In these Psalms the psalmist expresses his confidence in God’s goodness and power. The psalmist trusts in God to deliver him from danger and expresses his joy.

Examples of Psalms of confidence: Psalm 11; 16; 23.

The basic structure of the psalm of confidence/trust:

- i) A declaration of trust in God – E.g. Psalm 23:1.
- ii) A description of how the Psalmist views God. In these Psalms God is often described as a refuge, shepherd, rock, protector, shield. E.g. Psalm 18:2.
- iii) The psalmist’s disregard of his enemies or the thing that is threatening him – E.g. Psalm 23:4-5a; 27:2-3.
- iv) An expression of joy and gratitude – E.g. Psalm 27:6.
- v) A hope that this relationship with God will continue – E.g. Psalm 27:13-14; 23:6.

8. **Wisdom Psalms**

A characteristic of wisdom literature found in the Book of Proverbs is the contrast drawn between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, showing the way to live a godly

life. Several of the psalms also display this characteristic. Examples of wisdom psalms – Psalms 1; 19; 112; 119.

9. **Kingship Psalms**

The focus of these Psalms the King; speaking of his majesty and power. Examples – Psalms 2; 24; 110; 149.

These kingship or royal psalms fall into two categories:

- i) Those which focus upon the human king of Israel – primarily David and his descendants. They also look forward to the coming of the Messiah who would be descended from David. E.g. Psalm 21.
- ii) Those which focus upon God as King. God is depicted as the Sovereign ruler over all things. These psalms may also point to the coming of the Messiah as the King of Kings. E.g. Psalm 47.

10. The genres are not ridged classifications, but flexible. Some Psalms may fit into 2 or 3 genres. But being aware of genre will help us when we read the Psalms; we will know the Psalmist's purpose and what to expect.