

Well, I have been asked to talk about the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms is actually a challenge because it has so many different elements in it. First of all, in the **Old Testament**, what the Hebrews, Jewish people, called the *Tanak*, there are three parts: **Torah, which means the instruction; Nebeyim, prophets; and the third is the writings, Ketuvim.** That's where you get the word "*Tanak*." And that's how the Hebrew people talk about it.

Now where do the Psalms fit? Well, they don't really fit in any of those parts because in a sense they reflect all three of them. But ordinarily they are included in the third section: the writings. But they really aren't writings. The Psalms are really a hymn book. It's the **hymn book of the people of Israel.** And the hymn book is developed over many centuries. It is not authored by individuals, but is really **produced by whole collective groups over a long period of time.** We don't really know internally from the Psalms when they were written. We can tell about some writings when they were written because of the references, but not with the Psalms. So we have to guess a lot.

Now it's very important that you keep in mind three dates: 1200 BC, 1000 BC, and 586 BC. First of all, **1200 BC:** 1200 is the date more or less of the Exodus. We have to keep in mind that the Hebrew people, which became the Israel of God, were distinguished by historical events that took place within their experience. They didn't simply have a novel theology or a peculiar religion; they had a unique history. And they were formed in the events beginning with Exodus. They had a pre-history, which is recounted in the Book of Genesis. But their **formation as the people begins in Exodus.**

That formation involved their being **delivered** from state bondage in Egypt, their being **transported** into the desert and **formed** into a people through the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, which formed them into a **covenant**, a people peculiarly God's own; and then they were sent into the **land that they were to occupy**, which they called "Canaan," which later they called "Israel," which later was split into Israel and Judah. Presently it is called "Israel" again.

Now from the time of 1200 BC until the time of 1000 BC, for two hundred years, this people existed in a relatively disorganized fashion. **Covenant meant that God supplied** the people with their needs, with their laws, with protection, with **all the things normally a king would do.** This period of covenant in a sense came to an end around the year 1000 BC. This was for many reasons. One was the encroachment of the Philistines coming in from the sea. You can read about this in the First Book of Samuel, how the Philistine people were constantly attacking the Hebrews. Now being attacked was not new. The whole period of Judges and later was also a period when they were constantly being attacked by various peoples. **They grew to have many enemies.**

The problem this led to was the fact that in their **disorganized fashion they really could not resist their enemies in a powerful way**. So they asked their prophet, Samuel, for a king. Now this would require a major transition, a major revolution within the nature of the people because they didn't have a king. And the prophet Samuel objected to this and said, "No, God is your king. Yahweh is your king." But in a dream God came to Samuel and said, "It is not you they are rejecting; it is me. Give them what they want, but they will be sorry." So **Samuel then proceeded to anoint Saul as king**. And you know what happened. Saul organized the army, appointed various leaders, but was eventually upstaged by a young man named David.

Now **David** became a very powerful military leader, and eventually he took over the city of Jerusalem or Zion. This now marks the second period of Israelite history: the **establishment of the kingship in Jerusalem**. This will affect the history of the people from there on. The history of the kingship, however, was not exactly delightful. Only two kings escape scathing criticism by the authors of Scripture. For the most part, the kings fell into very bad habits, which I will describe in a moment.

However, their incompetence and their infidelity and the infidelity of the people eventually led to the third date, **586 BC, the exile, and this was a momentous cultural collapse**. The people were rooted out of their land and sent into exile in Babylon, and it is very hard to overestimate the tragic quality of this event. One of the results of this event was that the Hebrew people **became the People of the Book**. And for the most part the Hebrew people at this point now are going to be simply **the tribe of Judah, the other tribes having been lost already**.

There was another collapse, a more minor one, in **721 BC, when the Assyrians attacked the Northern Kingdom and destroyed it and deported many of those people**. So the Northern tribes were gone. The Southern tribe, Judah, remained with little pieces of Levi and Benjamin attached. This was the tribe that was brought into exile and eventually returned 538 BC. But they were never the same again. They are from then on a People of the Book.

Now it's very important we **distinguish between the history of the Bible and the history of the people** the Bible is talking about. There are two different histories. The Bible and the traditions that the Bible encases or embodies were only begun in a written form around the year **1000 BC** because that was a period of great transition from the earlier system to the Davidic monarchy. So that is when the **first writings** were put down, especially **the first four books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers**. During the exile, in 586 to 538 BC, those books plus Deuteronomy became fully edited and more or less the same as they are today. But **much of what we know as the Bible was written down only after the exile began**, because at this point the people could no longer depend upon their regular institutions and the priesthood, which was in charge of remembering everything that went on.

Now let's back up again to **pre-1000, pre-David**. Worship in Israel took place in a sporadic fashion at several times a year at **three major shrines: Shiloh, Shechem, and Gilgal**. Some of the Psalms may reflect some of these early gatherings of people, but we are not sure. We know that the people had a very good collective memory, so it's likely that some of what they did in those days, their ceremonies, their recitals, their dramas—**it's probable that some of this is included in some of the Psalms, but it's not sure.**

When we get to the **time of David**, something momentous changes. Not only do they have a king, but they have another problem because they are now becoming at home in a culture that is very foreign to what they came from. And in a certain way this **parallels the experience of modern-day Christians** living in a place like the United States or Western Europe, where the **traditional values** of Christianity **are really not the true underlying values of the society at large**, where perhaps some of the espoused values of society are similar, but the underlying real values of society are very, almost diametrically, opposed to many principles, values, and beliefs within the religious tradition of Christianity.

In a similar way, the **traditional values of the Israelite covenant was diametrically opposed to the culture of Canaan**, but the very idea of establishing a monarchy: taking over the capital, Jerusalem, making Jerusalem the capital now of a united monarchy under the authority of Yahweh in a land whose culture and whose language and whose habits were diametrically opposed to what had preceded is a problem. It's a problem in two ways: **holding onto the true values**, to the authentic tradition is a problem—**expressing those values in a way that people can understand them is another problem**. And, of course, they are not totally distinct; they come together. Even when the people under Joshua entered into the land—and we don't want to get into the details of that—but even at that time there was a cultural problem because the Hebrew people did not bring with them a sophisticated and developed culture. So they are constantly being **pulled into the mentality of the people with whom they were living**. And this was constantly denounced by the prophets. Later, the matter became even more acute.

So let me describe **the nature of the other nations**. There were two different kinds. Egypt, Babylonia, and Syria and many other city states of the ancient Middle East and Near East existed in a system of what we could call "**state idolatry**." In this system, myths, which were dramatic presentations of the history of the people, all led to the idea that the king or the leader, the ruler, the pharaoh, was appointed by a god or was a god himself. In Egypt, pharaoh was simply called divine: "*Horus*."

Elsewhere, the emperor or the king or the leader or the ensi or whatever you want to call him was not necessarily called divine, but he had the essence of divine authority, so that **worship was really a worship of the state or worship of the leader**, because there was no difference for all intents and purposes. Each country, city state, or nation had an elite that ruled for their own benefit. The vast majority of the people were serfs, landless serfs, or land-bound **serfs, who had no basic rights**. They were pawns on a board.

The whole idea of the **Israelite covenant** was that all of the people of the covenant were children of God and had a certain dignity. They were actors on the stage of life, and **God interacted with them, inviting them into a relationship and then waiting for their response in freedom.** The idea of an elite controlling the economy or the political system was not acceptable in a covenanted idea. **Law and righteousness and justice was already determined by God through his prophets,** especially through Moses in the first place.

In time, of course, the priests developed case laws that determine all kinds of things. So Israel became a nation and a people of law, and a law of God, not a law of men—that was important. But, of course, obviously, men wrote the laws, but they were inspired by an ideal that did not come from, let's say, ordinary society. And this is what we call **“revelation,” the opening of God, the disclosure of God and his intentions for a whole society.** Israel was not other-worldly. It was not concerned with something later on after people died. It was this-worldly. It was concerned with what God wanted now.

Now even explaining this required them, however, to use an image or a concept that they didn't invent themselves: covenant. The idea of covenant is an idea found in the Hittite culture. They used it to describe what would be called an “overlord” or a “higher authority” or a “suzerain” that would create a relation with a vassal state. So Israel understood itself as **a vassal state of God,** but a vassal state of God **that was free internally to live and to enjoy life in justice and freedom.** This marked it in a major way, substantial way, from all its neighbors.

Now as it entered into Canaan, it met a different kind of culture. In a sense its original enemy was Egypt because Egypt had enslaved them, and so its very existence was a reaction against that. But in **Canaan** they met a little different kind of religion—not state religion, not **worship of state, not worship of leader, but rather worship of money, worship** of prosperity, symbolized by the golden calf. A calf was a symbol of fertility, fecundity, and, of course, gold is gold. So the golden calf is the worship of money. And this became a prevalent religious motif within the land of Canaan. Historians call this phenomenon **“Baalism,”** from the word “*Baal*,” B-a-a-l, which means “lord” in Ugaritic. So it actually means the same thing as *Adonai* in Hebrew, for which reason many of the Hebrew people said, “Oh, we're just worshipping according to the language of the local people. We're saying *Baal* instead of *Adonai*, but, you know, it's the same word.” And the prophet said, “Oh, no, you are not. You are worshipping an entirely different thing because you are not really worshipping the God of the heavens, the Creator who made heaven and earth, the God who established us in covenant. You are worshipping yourself and your own prosperity.” So it was **a total materialism.** So there was this very definite difference.

So as Israel now begins to live within the land and establishes a monarchy, which is modeled to some degree on the nations around, the whole idea of monarchy, they didn't make that up, they, nonetheless, had to make things different so that they could be faithful

to what God had called them to. So they made it very clear that the **king** was not God, but merely **God's agent**. Therefore, they **developed hymns**, psalms, songs, poems, in which they **exalted God as the king**, not of Israel, not of Palestine, but **of the whole universe**. So the theme then of God as cosmic king became a way they had of using the language and the ideas of that particular place to express something that had never been expressed before and was faithful to the original idea of covenant.

Now the so-called theology, in other words, the ideas about God, grew as time went on. Originally when God called Moses, Moses said, "Well, whom shall I say sent me?" God said, "I AM WHO AM." Now this is another profound idea, profound revelation, that **God is the ground of consciousness**. God is the ground of consciousness, and because we have self-reflection, **we have an image of God in us, the feeling of "I."** That is a profound idea. As far as I know, it doesn't exist anywhere else.

But what else can we say about this God? Well, they decided they had to say more about this God. Is this God just a tribal God of the Hebrews? Well, no. No, this God is much bigger than that. This God is the God of the sky, because you see the sky to the ancient world covers everything. So **the God of the sky covers everything**.

Now did other cultures and nations have a sky god? Yes, they did, but they were very weak and retiring sorts: Zeus, Jupiter, for example. But Yahweh was not a weak, retiring God. Yahweh was powerful, universal, dominant. **Yahweh made things happen and revealed his character in the events that the people experienced in their lives**. And this is a unique idea in the history of religion, as far as I know. Only the people who wrote the Old Testament had this idea. And, of course, the people of the New Testament carried it on. So **this is the Judeo-Christian understanding of religion. And it is not like other understandings of religion**.

So now when we look at the Psalms and we understand this background, they will start to speak to us. They will not speak to us in ways that we can simply take out and take home and say, "Well, isn't that nice. It's a poetic expression." People have used the Psalms in this way. And you may use them this way, but that's not really what their purpose is. So if we look at the Psalms as they are, as they have come to us, we will see something about, well, perhaps **about faith and faith experience**.

Now, those who write books such as—if you have a Bible with you—if you open your Bible to the Introduction to the Psalms—don't do it now—but it will talk about various categories of Psalms. It's okay to do that, and I will mention just one particular way of categorizing the Psalms. One way is to talk about hymns. There are many Psalms that can be called hymns. In particular, there are two different kinds of hymns: hymns to Zion—okay, Zion is Jerusalem; so these are exalting the role of Zion in the life of the people. Incidentally, if you read the Book of Revelation, what does the author talk about? The New Jerusalem. What is that? That is from this. **The more you understand the original**

meaning of Psalms, the more you understand how the New Testament and the Christian faith developed.

So, **songs of Zion and hymns of enthronement**—this is the idea that God is the universal king. Now, you might say, logically that doesn't make any sense. How could anyone enthrone God? True, it doesn't make any sense. But people enthrone their kings. Since God is the king, well, he has to be enthroned. So take it as poetry. We could look at some of these a little later if you choose to.

The second even more prominent form of Psalm is **lament**—lament. Now what do you think a lament is? What does that word “lament” mean to you? Sad—could be—sorrowful, painful. Well, guess what? This is a lament; this Psalm you sang when we started is a lament—**Psalm 51**. “Be merciful, O Lord, have mercy on us, for we have sinned. We come before you, cleanse us from within. Have mercy on us, Lord. Have mercy on us, Lord.” That's a lament. It's **an expression of need**. It's an expression of sorrow. So it can be of anything: an expression of **sorrow, sadness, need**—anything is a lament where the community is asking for something, needing something, suffering something. It could be a cry of pain or horror. And what's the purpose of the lament? Again, this is a little bit hard for us Christians to understand or to accept, but **the purpose of lament is to excite God's pity**. To excite God's pity—and even **to move God to action!** Now **Jesus did not approve of that motivation in prayer**, as you know. He said, “God knows what you need before you ask it. Don't ask for mercy without giving it,” and so on; but this is the history.

Another category is **royal Psalms**. Royal Psalms are Psalms **exalting or praising the king, the human king, David or his successors**. Now royal Psalms became important because—well, for Christians in particular—because **Jesus** is the Son of David, so the royal Psalms set apart the Son of David for special honor and **giving him a special role to play in shepherding people**. So we keep those as special.

Individual laments. The first one I said was the communal. Then there are individual laments concerning certain individual cases like sickness or oppression or fear of death. Very often these laments are **challenging God with the question: Why?** Why are you allowing me to suffer? Why are you oppressing me with this problem? This, again, is not something easy for us Christians to take, but it is the way people really felt—and it's still the way people feel, so I think we have to acknowledge that **the Psalms are expressing real emotions, real feeling, real perceptions, even if our theology would seek to correct those perceptions**.

Another theme or another category would be **individual thanksgiving**.

And then there are various minor ones, such as, **pilgrim's songs, victory songs, sacred legends, instructions**. The whole Torah, that's the first five books—those are instructions, so the Psalms also reflect that, instruction, some of them. **Wisdom, vows and prophecy**.

Now some of the **themes** that grow up within the Psalms are the theme of “**God as cosmic king**” and eventually “**God as savior.**” So the idea of God as savior really springs up from the Psalms and is a response to the laments.

I think maybe it would be good for us to look at some of them individually. So we could go to, for example, let’s go to **Psalm 44**. “We have heard for ourselves, God, our forefathers have told us what deeds you did in their times.” So it begins with a recalling of the history of the people, and it tells God that we know what you can do Then it carries that on for quite a while. This is a little too long, so I am not going to read the whole thing.

Then in verse 4: “God, you are my king. Command victory for Jacob. By your help we shall throw back our enemies. In your name we shall trample down our assailants. My trust is not in my bow, nor will my victory be won by my sword, for you deliver us from our foes. You put to confusion those hostile to us. In God we have gloried all day long. We shall praise your name forever.” This is a petition for help, but it’s a **petition for help within the basis of a lament because of the powerlessness.**

In verse 19: “Yet you have crushed us as the sea serpent was crushed and covered us with deepest darkness. Had we forgotten the name of our God and spread our hands in prayer to alien gods, would not God have found this out?” Now this is a strange idea. What they are saying is: We are not responsible for our problems. We didn’t do anything wrong. **We were not unfaithful, and yet you neglected us. So that’s the human lament. So it’s a challenge to God.** God, you are the king. You did great things in the past. Now let’s do that again. Save us now; save us today. Be our king now. We’re counting on you. And there is this **little threat**: Well, if you don’t, we might not be your people anymore. So, that’s one of the very human aspects of the Psalms.

Then verse 23: “Rouse yourself, Lord. Why do you sleep? Awake. Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face heedless of our misery and our suffering, for we sink down to the dust and lie prone to the ground. Arise, and come to our aid, for your love’s sake deliver us.” Now this **appeal for deliverance actually began a very powerful movement within Israel for salvation.** I don’t believe you will see this in the first five books. You won’t see it in the prophets. The prophets are always correcting people and even condemning them for their failures. But here we find the people crying out for salvation. How did the Exodus take place in the first place? Because people cried out to the Lord. God said to Moses, “I have heard my people’s cry.” So **now the people are crying again.** So in one sense the lament is the most basic form of prayer if you want to think of it that way, because it’s the prayer in which **people share their brokenness.** It’s the prayer in which people share **their hopes and their despair.** It’s a prayer in which people **open their hearts totally to God.** And this bears now a result, mainly, the hope for salvation.

Now one of the most important laments is **Psalm 22**. I think we would like to look at that because this is **the lament Jesus quotes as he hangs on the cross**. Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from heeding my groans? My God, by day I cry out to you, but there is no answer.” This is what Jesus was praying on the cross. “In the night I cry with no respite. You, the praise of Israel, are enthroned in the sanctuary. In you our fathers put their trust. They trusted, and you rescued them. To you they cried, and were delivered. In you they trusted, and were not discomfited. But I am a worm, not a man.” You know the Good Friday liturgy—that’s quoted. “Abused by everyone, scorned by the people. All who see me jeer at me, grimace at me and wag their heads. ‘He threw himself on the Lord for rescue. Let the Lord deliver him, for he holds him dear.’ But you are he who brought me from the womb, who laid me in my mother’s breast. To your care I was entrusted at birth. From my mother’s womb you have been my God.”

To me it’s utterly remarkable that this could have been written before the time of Christ because it applies to him in a way it could apply to no one else. “Do not remain far from me, for trouble is near, and I have no helper. A herd of bulls surrounds me; great bulls of Bashan beset me. Lions ravening and roaring open their mouths wide against me. My strength drains away like water; and all my bones are racked. My heart has turned to wax and melts within me. My mouth is dry as a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my gums. I’m laid low in the dust of death. Hounds are all about me. A band of ruffians rings me around, and they have bound me hand and foot. I tell my tale of misery while they look on gloating. They share out my clothes among them and cast lots for my garments. But do not remain far away, Lord. You are my help. Come quickly to my aid. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the axe. Save me from the lion’s mouth, this poor body from the horns of the wild ox,” and so on. I won’t read the whole thing. But this is Jesus’ prayer on the cross, and to me it’s quite remarkable that it contains this incredible description of his experience.

What does this mean? What this means is that Jesus’ description is not that unique. **And if we follow the thinking of the Psalms, we will try to get into the experience of all of this, and realize none of them is unique. We experience the Psalms ourselves when we try to grapple with the issues of life:** Why is there injustice? Why do the good suffer? Where is God? Where is God in this particular situation or that particular situation?

Now from a Christian point of view, **we would never try to shame God into activity.** Jesus didn’t actually do that. **He surrendered:** “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” But, nonetheless, the idea is that **the Psalms express the agony that living a faithful life in this world causes.** So rather than trying to take anything particular out of the Psalms, I think it would be better if we simply read them for how **we can enter into their experience, the experience of people who originally sang them.**

In these various Psalms there are **three personifications of evil**. One is called chaos. **Chaos is disorder**. In the midst of the ancient world, chaos was the state of life before the creation; and it's God's role to keep the world in proper order. Now we experience chaos in our lives. The second great evil is **death**. The third is **meaninglessness**. These are personified as cosmic forces. But if you think about it, **that's what Jesus faced: chaos, death, and meaninglessness**. And for Him **faith was holding onto his Father, holding onto the love that he had known, even in the dark moment when he couldn't know it**. St. Thomas says on the cross Jesus didn't know the Father the way he had known him his whole life long, or it wouldn't have been real suffering. But he did suffer. He did know meaninglessness. He did question whether God loved Him. That was part of his passion.

So the basic idea of the Psalms is: **if Yahweh is King, he has to show forth his power**. And **he did in the resurrection of Christ, but not before**. Now did the Psalms point to the resurrection? No, not exactly; but they did point to the fact that **God often acts in unexpected ways**. So those who were attuned to unexpected ways God might act were ready to accept this gift of the resurrected life in Christ. Those who were not so attuned found this absurd and contrary to their faith. And they were right. It is absurd and contrary to their faith, but true anyway.

Those are some thoughts I had on the Psalms; and hopefully they will help you read and pray them more meaningfully.