

feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

December 5, 2012

Dearest family,

Thank you for the kindness of your attention on Sunday as we attempted Part 2 of the introduction to our Psalm Study. If you were there you will know that there now is a Part 3 pending! As the biggest book of the Bible, with such incredible internal variety, it is not surprising that it is challenging to give a comprehensive introduction. I am doing my best. What have we basically dealt with?

- The Psalms and how they relate to Israel
- The Psalms relate to themselves (interpretation)
- The Psalms and how they relate to other Psalms (genres)
- The Psalms and how they relate to key themes and subjects
- The Psalms and how they relate to the New Testament
- The Psalms and how they relate to Jesus
- The Psalms and how they relate to the church

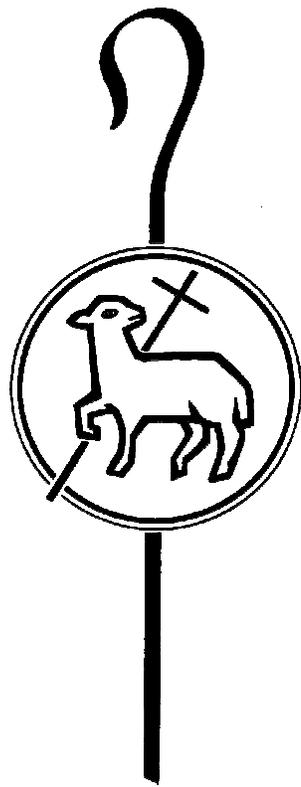
But once we've done the reading and taken stock of all these relationships, we must take care of one more: **the Psalms and how are they relate to us, to me.**

Our observation of the text, our asking questions of it, our interpretation, our meditation is incomplete without the application. That's what the study of scripture is ultimately unto. One might argue that the great depths of the greatest teachers and preachers had to do with their devotional love for and identification with the Psalms. One of these was Charles Spurgeon, whose multi volume "Treasury of David" is in my theological library. He said this: *"More and more is the conviction forced upon my heart that every man must traverse the territory of the Psalms himself if he would know what a goodly land they are. They flow with milk and honey, but not to strangers; they are fertile to lovers of their hills and vales...Happy the one who knows for themselves the secret of the Psalms."*

To be honest, I have no idea how many messages I am going to be doing in this series. I am hoping in the course of it to touch on most if not all of the many different aspects of the Psalms that I have referred to in this introduction, in a manner that a gymnast has to touch down in every square in the floor exercise. But for all the squares that have to be touched, the main thing is choosing which particular theological and pastoral somersaults we will focus on, in a manner hopefully that captures the heart and passions of the divine choreographer, not merely the artist who is the poet, but the artist who is the Creator himself, who longs that our eyes will be lifted beyond the finitude and limitations of the squares, as important and requiring as they are, to Him who sits enthroned as it were in the bleachers, the audience for the way we live our prayerful and praise-filled lives.

It is my desire, not only that you will get a feel for the Psalms, but that they will get a hold of you. I have some thoughts about some of the Psalms we will consider but I have by no means decided on a complete list. I'm going into this as if on the very kind of spiritual journey that I have said the Psalms chart and describe. So I am inviting you to join me to be taught:

- How to make these Psalms your own as Spurgeon suggested
- How to let them teach you how to express yourself to God, how to meditate, how to consider
- How to help you to pray when you're not sure how: for suffering, about sin, about sinners, about evil, about nations, for enemies, when in doubt or angry.
- How to encourage your confession and your repentance, in your desire to be right, to get it right, to trust for your future



- How to learn how to intercede in wartime, in the context of trouble and trial, whether personal, communal, national or global
- How to bring reality into the presence of God
- How to relate godlily to the past, live godlily in the present and hope godlily for the future, how to relate past holy tradition to present experience and thus keep anticipating an ancient future; how to relate to the redemptive history of faith and to the lives of the saints
- How to bring our fears back to the moorings of faith
- How to trust God with our emotions in the raw and watch them being refined as things are revealed
- How to understand scripture in the light of what God has supremely and superbly done in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So many psalms, so little time! It's not surprising, is it, that Athanasius would describe the Psalms as "*an epitome of the whole scriptures*" or that Luther would describe the collection as "*a little Bible and the summary of the OT.*" Another commentator has observed: "*It includes illustrations of every religious truth which it is necessary for us to know.*"

In the last section of my message, I began to address the textual introduction to the Psalms themselves – in other words the Psalms that act as the front door to the entire collection, namely Psalms 1 and 2. We didn't get very far than set them up, and I will spend the next message dealing with this necessary part of introduction – how the Psalms introduce themselves. These two Psalms are brilliantly and strategically placed together at the threshold of the Psalter. They are in fact a custom-made introduction. The Psalms is an edited collection, so the editors deliberately chose the preface to the most important and influential piece of devotional literature in the world.

You know what an overture is, right? It is an introduction or an approach to something. In music it's the orchestral piece at the beginning of an opera, or suite or any composition. It comes to us from Latin, via Old French into Middle English, from the word which gives us "aperture" – a small opening into a new vista. That's precisely what these Psalms do as we approach the whole volume.

They have been described in many ways other than my image of an overture: as a threshold, as a door-keeper. I love reading the scholarly commentarians on the Psalms, the linguistic experts, the grammarians, but I also love studying the responses to the Psalms of pastors down through the centuries, from the early church fathers to the Puritan pastors to giants like Spurgeon, to our present time, to pastors like Eugene Petersen whose writings on the Psalms are extraordinarily sublime and have been extremely formative in my own understandings as they resonate so closely with my own innate responses. Talking of Petersen let me quote him on the matter at hand: "*The text that teaches us to pray doesn't begin with prayer, We are not ready. We are wrapped up in ourselves. We are knocked around by the world...In prayer...we decide to leave an ego-centered world and enter a God-centered world...But it is not easy...Psalms 1 and 2 pave the way. They get us ready to pray...set as an entrance to them, pillars flanking the way into prayer. We are not unceremoniously dumped into the world of prayer; we are courteously led across an ample porch...we are adjusted to the realities of prayer...They put our feet on the path that goes from the non-praying world in which we are habitually distracted and intimidated, into the praying world where we come to attention and practice adoration.*" Superb!

So how do these first two Psalms actually work as that kind of introduction? Why were they deliberately chosen by the editors of the Psalms (probably post-exile) for this purpose? Ah! Join me next time for the discussion about this, but in the meantime, read them yourselves and try and get your own thoughts about it. And next time, if you are still sitting comfortably, we'll begin yet again to try and finish this introduction!!

Pastorally yours,
Stuart

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