



Counselling from the Book of Psalms

Dr R. E. H. Uprichard brings before us principles found in Psalm 23 and throughout the Psalter.

Martin Luther described the Psalter as 'a Bible in miniature, in which all things which are set forth at greater length in the rest of the Scriptures are collected into a beautiful manual of wonderful and attractive brevity'. In some ways Psalm 23 is the book of Psalms in miniature. Ideas about God, vivid scenes from real life and the personal passion of the psalmist which are found in the Shepherd Psalm are reflected throughout the whole Psalter.

Turning to the New Testament, it is noticeable that of all the Psalms mentioned by Jesus, Psalm 23 is one from which he does not quote directly. There can be little doubt, however, from the similarities in both thought and language, that in his teaching about the good Shepherd, recorded in John 10, he has Psalm 23 in mind.

Counselling from the book of Psalms requires careful exegesis and interpretation. It is only when we grasp clearly the teaching of the psalmist that we can apply it meaningfully to ourselves and to others. As we regard Psalm 23 as a model of the Psalter and consider its teaching in the light of the whole book of Psalms and of Jesus' instruction about the good shepherd we discover valuable principles to help us in counselling from the Psalms.

One of these principles is that the psalmist's God was both majestic and personal. The glory of God is in evidence everywhere throughout the Psalms. Psalm 23 uses the title LORD to describe God. Printed entirely in capitals it represents a Hebrew name for God which the Jews particularly revered. They would not dare even to read this name aloud but rather substituted another title for it. God's greatness is reflected toward the close of Psalm 23 in the promised 'goodness and love' which would constantly attend the psalmist's life. This 'goodness' recalls the excellence of God's creation. The 'love' reminds us of God's covenant faithfulness.

What we find in microcosm in Psalm 23 is enlarged throughout the Psalter. God is a sovereign Creator, a victorious King, a fearful Judge and a covenant Lord of his people. Psalm 99 speaks eloquently of God's perfect character. In three sections each ending with the chant 'He is holy' it extols the virtues of God's holiness in terms of his power, justice and forgiveness. The Psalms record the majesty of God both in his being and his acts.

However, the Psalms also portray a God who is intensely personal. Paradoxically, this characteristic too is reflected in the title LORD. While speaking of God's majesty it was also the covenant name for God. It described God as He drew near to his people, entered into a relationship with them and made them his very own. There is a close link here with Jesus' teaching about the good Shepherd. Jesus quotes Psalm 22 from the cross using a different word for God, the Hebrew EL - ELOI, 'my God'. He seems to allude to Psalm 23 when he says 'I am the good

Shepherd', for the Hebrew title translated LORD comes from the root of the verb 'to be'. This was the name by which God had revealed himself to Moses. 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you"' (Ex. 3:14). The good Shepherd is the covenant LORD who is near to his people.

The imagery of the shepherd also suggests a personal God. Frequently in the Psalms God is depicted in this way. God is the psalmist's shield, rock, shelter, high tower and tent. The idea of personal relationship with God is prominent. Of all these descriptions shepherd is perhaps the most personal and intimate. It speaks of the loving guardianship and affection of the eastern shepherd who often treated his sheep individually as pets and not just as animals.

The structure of Psalm 23 itself reflects this personal relationship. It moves from the description in the third person, 'He makes, leads, restores, guides' to the second, 'your rod and staff, you prepare, you anoint'. The 'personal' nature of Psalm 23 is reflected not only in the covenant Shepherd LORD but also in the psalmist's personal relationship with this God. 'The LORD is *my* Shepherd'.

What is true of Psalm 23 in this respect is evident throughout the Psalms. They are prayers of complaint, longing, lament, praise, adoration and meditation. But they are all personal. They are the language of conversation of the psalmist with his God. Of this Calvin writes, 'The rest of Scripture contains the commands which God gave His servants to be delivered to us. Here the prophets themselves, in their converse with God, because they lay bare all their inmost feelings, invite or compel every one of us to examine himself that none of all the infirmities to which we are subject may remain hidden'.

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This personal emphasis is clear in Jesus' teaching. The good Shepherd knows his sheep and is known by them. Their security is guaranteed by their personal relationship with both God the Father and God the Son. It is this dual personal aspect, that of a personal relationship with a personal God, which makes the Psalms such a strong source for counselling. We present a God who is transcendent and immanent, a God who is glorious and majestic in his being and yet graciously near in his covenant

dealings with the individual. The Psalms present a God whose greatness is never diminished but rather enlarged through his 'personal nature'. And the glory of this poetry is that it also reflects the human's response to the majestic yet personal God. Man that is born of woman can say, 'The LORD is my Shepherd'.

A second principle which can help us in counselling is that the Psalms present a view of life which is relevant. This is particularly vivid in Psalm 23 which describes how the shepherd's care ensures that the sheep finds food in the green pastures, satisfaction beside the quiet waters, refreshment in pleasant surroundings, guidance on the straight paths of plateau land, and protection in the narrow valley ravine. All conditions of its existence are met by the shepherd's care, whether in circumstances of prosperity or adversity, all is directed toward its well-being and benefit.

The teaching of the Psalms as a whole is suitable for counselling because it addresses the varied scenes of life. The instruction of Psalm 119 directs in the practical journey of faith. It provides food for the soul. Psalm 103 recalls God's blessings in life and induces a spirit of contentment and gratitude toward God, and a satisfaction of inner-being. In Psalm 42 the psalmist is rescued from restless depression and led to renewed faith in God. His soul is restored. Psalm 43 is a prayer to be led in the face of opposition to victory and to paths of righteousness. 'Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain' (Psalm 43:3). Psalm 139 is a salutary reminder that in the darkest valley God's rod and staff provide a comforting if disconcerting presence. 'If I go up to the heavens, you are there, if I make my bed in hell, you are there' (Psalm 139:8). All the changing scenes of life are reflected in the Psalms and the relevance of God's presence and word for each situation is sharply focused in the context of a warm, personal and prayerful relationship. This affords apt material for counselling.

It would, however, be all too easy to limit the relevance of the Psalms to this general purpose, to conclude that Psalm 23 provides an idyllic pastoral scene of satisfaction to be drawn on in life's adversities and, above all, to provide material for helpful reflection toward life's end. But this would be to miss the depth of the relevance of the Psalter's teaching.

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A deeper understanding is evident in Psalm 23, both in its language and meaning and in Jesus' observations on the good Shepherd. In this sense, we can almost take the psalm as a parable and search for a heavenly meaning behind the earthly story. Jesus speaks of the pastures which the sheep find as spiritual food directly related to himself. The satisfaction which they experience is life 'to the full'. The Hebrew word translated 'restores' in Psalm 23:3 contains the idea of renewal, a complete turnabout of life. Jesus describes himself as the gate into the sheep-pen, through whose entrance men are 'saved'. Clearly, more is involved than mere refreshment of life. While the paths of Psalm

23:3 could literally be rendered 'plain' or 'straight', the word is normally used for 'righteousness' in the Old Testament. Jesus obviously conceives of the sheep following him on a spiritual pilgrimage, a path of righteousness. The Shepherd of Psalm 23 protects the sheep. Jesus drives the imagery much deeper in claiming that by his death he not only protects the sheep but gives life to them.

All of this suggests that we are entitled to think of the Psalms as reflecting not simply human thoughts on life's varied experiences but as providing principles about man's relationship to God at the most fundamental level. It seems perfectly admissible to use Psalm 40, with its vivid details of the psalmist's plight, his rescue by God and his experience of a new purpose-filled life, as a paradigm of salvation and to counsel from it evangelistically, for this surely is the principle of truth underlying the outer parabolic form of the psalmist's circumstances. Equally, Psalm 23 expounds not only the way into God's sheep-fold, an experience of the Shepherd's sovereign grace but the progress in this new life in both circumstances of prosperity and adversity. This interpretation stresses the basic principle within the psalm of a personal covenant relationship with God. Of course, care must always be taken to avoid 'spiritualising' details which are plainly not to be taken in this way. Careful exegesis, however, will uncover principles relevant not only to life but to man's relationship with God. This relationship at its deepest point constitutes the true meaning of the Psalms.

Of this aspect of the Psalms Athanasius writes, 'They seem to me to be a kind of mirror for everyone who sings them, in which he may observe the motions of the soul and as he observes them give utterance to them in words. He who hears them read, takes them as if they were spoken specially for him. Stricken in his conscience he repents, on hearing of hope in God, and of the grace which is given to those who believe he rejoices as if this grace were promised to him in particular, and begins to thank God'. The relevance of the Psalms lies in their nature as 'soul-talk' to God.

Another important principle which proves helpful as we attempt to counsel from the Psalms is that the Psalms take a realistic view of morality. In spite of all its idyllic pleasantness Psalm 23 recognizes dark valleys and enemies. Both circumstantial and personal forces work to disrupt the serenity of the psalmist's existence. This is true to life. It rescues the reader from an unreal world of fantasy and helps him face up to living for God in the world which he daily experiences.

In his teaching about the good Shepherd Jesus emphasises the threat of opposing forces. The thieves and robbers have only one aim in view, the destruction of the sheep. The help of the hired hand is of little benefit. On seeing the wolf coming, he deserts the sheep. Jesus pledges genuine care and protection. He goes to the ultimate length to ensure their provision. He alone is the gate into the sheep-pen. He alone dies for the sheep.

The psalmist's help as he faces danger and opposition also comes exclusively from God. The Shepherd's rod and staff protect him. God provides a full table and an overflowing cup as he faces his enemies. God anoints him with purpose, blesses him with prosperity and secures his future with hope. The 'goodness and love' are demonstrably God's, not the psalmist's. The psalmist experiences them but never initiates them. They are of grace. The moral tone of Psalm 23 echoes a felicity of life not as a reward for human goodness but as a gift of divine grace.

The moral tone in other psalms is equally clear and realistic. Psalm 1 defines two paths in life, the good and evil, the right and wrong. They are initially exclusive ways and lead to different ends. The righteous man is stable and prospers, the wicked man is superficial and perishes. Morality is clearly defined and God-related.

Psalm 37, however, deals with a situation where this does not seem to be the case, where it is the evil man who apparently prospers. The righteous are advised against envy which only leads to sin. Contentment with what they possess is commended for God will never forsake the righteous. The prosperity of the wicked, on the other hand, is short-lived. The righteous must continue to obey God and to note the beneficial results in their character. They will ultimately inherit the land. Here are truths as vital for moral counselling today as when first spoken by the psalmist.

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The self-righteous professions of the psalmist do not necessarily imply that he believed in salvation by works rather than by grace. In many instances these professions are quite specific dealing with a particular sin of which the psalmist claims innocence. Even where they occur more generally they simply reflect his sincere attempt to obey God’s law. Nowhere do we find claims of ‘sinless perfection’. In the light of the requirements both of sacrificial and purificatory rites it would have been unlikely that the psalmist would even have conceived of such an idea at all.

Where sin had been committed the psalmist expresses a deep sense of guilt and contrition before God. Judged by the clear if limited revelation of the Old Testament these professions are simply the pleas of the psalmist in prayer before God to honour divine justice for his people. They are neither the claimed basis of the psalmist’s perfection nor the averred reason why God should answer him.

The ‘imprecatory psalms’ pose a serious problem. Can we as Christian agree with a desire that God should bring sudden destruction on our foes and massacre their children?

The attempt to exegete such passages in the future tense as statements rather than prayers seems indefensible. It is equally unsatisfactory to brand such aspirations as ‘Old Testament morality’ since we find a similar kind of expression in the New Testament (Gal. 1:8,9; Rev. 6:10; 18:20; 19:1-6). Furthermore the Old Testament itself teaches the duty of love (Lev. 19:17, 18).

It is necessary, however, to recall that such imprecations were not the results of personal vendetta nor cries for vengeance. If they were personal at all they were appeals from the psalmist to God

to look on his plight brought about by his enemies. Above all, they were expressions of anger against God’s enemies and longings that God would destroy them utterly so that the cause of good might flourish. There was in them a sense of grievance that God’s cause had been thwarted by the acts of the psalmist’s enemies.

We ought also to remember that ideas of a future life were relatively undeveloped in the Old Testament. If justice was to be seen at all, it would have to be seen in this life. There was, in addition, little distinction in Hebrew thought between sin and the sinner. The concept tended to be identified with the person. Destruction of sin involved the destruction of the sinner, in this case the psalmist’s and God’s enemies.

However, these aspirations even qualified by considerations such as those mentioned, must ultimately be judged in the light of the New Testament revelation in general and Christ’s teaching in particular. As in the case of affirmations of self-righteousness the partial nature of revelation in the Old Testament and the fulfilment of Old Testament in the New are important considerations. Our judgement must therefore be sufficiently informed to recognize the limits of the psalmist’s revelation and to reckon accordingly.

While there are problems with the morality of the Psalms at these two points, the clear and realistic nature of morality throughout the entire Psalter is not obscured. The distinction of good and evil and the God-related character of the morality ensures this clarity.

Augustine who, encouraged by his mother, came through stormy moral seas to the Christian faith, reflects on the Psalms in his Confessions, ‘In what accents I addressed Thee, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those faithful songs, the language of devotion which banishes the spirit of pride, while I was still a novice in true love of Thee and as a catechumen rested in that country house along with Alypius who was also a catechumen, with my mother at our side, in the dress of a woman but with the faith of a man, with the calmness of age, the affection of a mother, the piety of a Christian’. The Psalms had obviously a strong influence in moulding Augustine’s morality in the same way as they had affected his mother’s faith. The moral teaching of the Psalms provides further apposite material from which effective counselling may proceed.

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