

Psalm 71

One of the reasons some of us, who otherwise love to read and study Scripture, yet avoid the Psalms, do so is because they sound so much alike to each other. And there are 150 of them! Yes, some stand out - 'The Lord is my shepherd...', 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand...', 'Thy word is lamp unto my feet...', but many seem to be so similar as to make close examination of one sufficient for examining all. David is always in trouble and so always calling on God; God is always delivering David; David always praises God for the deliverance. Always the same. Well... that's an overstatement but how many times is too many times to remember and sing of God's deliverance? Really.

Think of the Psalms as a hymnbook – a Psalter. These Psalms were written over centuries, and edited by unknown editors into small collections. Later these small collections were compiled by still later editors into the complete Psalter we have now. Perhaps some of the Psalms were commissioned and written at this late date to give a feel of fullness to the whole. For example: Psalm 1 introduces all the Psalms and may have been written for this very purpose and therefore is the last Psalm written. Maybe. And Psalm 150, one of the simplest Psalms, and the Psalm that invites us to keep on praising and making Psalms, may also have been written last to conclude the whole hymnbook. Or first as the prototypical Psalm. Again maybe. It's hard to know with certainty.

These collections are organized and have organizing principles. One principle is chronology – the Psalms of David, an early Psalm writer, if not the first, are in Book 1 and Book 2. Book 2 ends by saying 'This concludes the Psalms of David'. Books 3, 4, and 5 acknowledge Israel's later history, primarily the exile and hope of return.

Another principle of organization is intentionally placing similar Psalms together. Sometimes this is pairing. Occasionally one Psalm seems to be a continuation of the one before it. Psalms 42 and 43 are so together that they are counted as one Psalm in some ancient Bibles. Sometimes this by subject. Psalms 120-134 seem all to be written as marching Psalms to be used by pilgrims walking up to Jerusalem. They are called the 'Psalms of Ascent'. Sometimes the organizing principle is by purpose of placement in the Psalter. The last Psalms sound very similar, each one exhorting us to praise God with music.

In all this, remember this is a hymnbook. Our hymnbooks also have organizing principles. Some mimic the liturgical calendar – Advent hymns first, Christmas carols next, etc. Some organize around theological themes – they are often Trinitarian: God the Father first, Christ the Son second, Holy Spirit next. Christian Psalters almost always follow the order of the Hebrew, the Biblical, Psalter – 1-150.

So, after a long page you didn't ask for, back to our original issue – 'they sound alike'.

Yes. They were often grouped to do just that. Both the repetition and the nuanced difference within and among these groups, and both the exact wording in them and the subtle variances between them, were meant to teach the easily caught surety (repetition reinforces) and the particularity (shades of meaning seen only after close readings) of the salvation of God. Grouping Psalms that are alike, or have some themes that are alike, or which sound alike, or were written at time near one another, are placed near one another in the Psalter to show both what is common, thus broadly true and important, and to show what is different within them, thus what is distinctively important as well.

The Psalms are poetry in the service of worship, instruction, expressing and coming to know God's faithfulness and strength and our feeble but welcome trust in God. So too is the organization of the whole Psalter. There was an art to it.

These Psalms we study now, 68-72, demonstrate everything mentioned above.

Sometimes these Psalms are grouped as 65-72, sometimes as 69-72, sometimes as 70-72, sometimes as 70-71, and then 72. They conclude Book 2 – Psalms 42-72. They also introduce, especially the last two, 71 and 72, the next book – Book 3, 73-89.

When we finish this preaching series next week, we will add one more week to our teaching series by engaging in a Bible Study of Psalm 66 and 67. I will not be preaching on these two Psalms but these two will help us complete this section of this book of Psalms.

This week one day read Psalm 65-72, then another day 69-72, then another 70-72.

Name the common themes.

Write out the common (quoted?) phrases that are exact or nearly so.

Name the themes are not shared and which make each Psalm unique.

Write out the 1-3 main phrases that distinguish each Psalm.

When you are done, you are in a good position to discern what the editors were doing.

You will also be less tempted to say 'They all sound alike'.

Psalms 71 has no superscription – the words before verse one of each Psalm that are usually italicized to show they are not part of the reading of the Psalm but can tell us something about the Psalm.

Some of these superscription notes are about the music of the Psalm – the name of the tune to which it was to be sung perhaps or the style of presentation perhaps. Because the ancient music is lost to us, we do not know with certainty what they mean. Some of these superscriptions tell who wrote it – David, Asaph. Some tell us why or when it was written – ‘when David fled the Philistines’, ‘when Absalom rebelled against David’.

These superscriptions we imagine were written by the editors of the Psalms rather than the original composers. They are usually not considered part of the divinely inspired Bible but are a help to our reading of God’s Word.

Psalms 71 is rare, very rare, in that it has no superscription. This may be because it was not circulated separately but was always combined with Psalm 70. This is true also for Psalms 42 and 43 which we know were combined for a long time. Psalm 43 has no superscription. It also helps to know that the meter of the Hebrew (yes, Hebrew poetry has meter) is similar and sometimes identical in the two Psalms that are paired.

It is both what they have in common and what they do not share that wonderfully combines the two Psalms. Both Psalms are petitions of David (presumably) who is in trouble and calls on the Lord to help and deliver. In both cases David is confident the Lord will save him from his enemies, and in both Psalms David offers the Lord praise for the deliverance.

But...

Psalms 70 is short, one of the shortest, and in a hurry. The Psalm reads quickly, rushing the reader. It has a quick (that is, short) meter. It is dominated by such words ‘hasten’, ‘come quickly’, ‘do not delay’. They begin and end the Psalm. David is in trouble ... now! He needs help ... now! David is in the moment, we would say. This experience is existential, we would say.

Not so Psalm 71. It is longer, though not very long, and reads at a steadier pace. The meter is not quick. David is in trouble, but the urgency is not the most important part of his experience. Reliability is. In a rare reference to his age David tells us he is old. His troubles continue and he is in need of rescue, but God has always rescued him in his youth and David is now asking, not so desperately or with such a demanding voice as in Psalm 70, that God will rescue him still. This is not so much existential as philosophical. It takes a longer look.

And it is that difference that makes this Psalm stand out.

David seems not so confident now.

We can overhear him say/think in this Psalm: When I was young (vibrant, yes cocky and took unnecessary risks sometimes, ready for action, and almost always winning) you, Lord, valued me and looked out for me. That's how I got to be old. Thank you. But... now that I am old, and the rest of the world is giving me not so subtle signs that I am now irreplaceable and can be discarded, you and me Lord, we're still good, right? It is not like I deserve you any more now than then, but I need you just as much and you value me just as much ... right? Right?

Read this Psalm with this tone:

Since my youth, you, Lord, have been my hope, my trust;

You came through for me.

I get in trouble (that's my job);

You rescue me (that's your job).

I trust in you (did I mention that before?);

You rescue me (I know I mentioned that before).

That's our deal, right?

The deal for my whole life, right?

It was true in my infancy when you (God is the midwife?) took me from the womb.

It will still be true until the end of days... Right? Right?

The point is not mercy so much (nothing like mercy is mentioned in Psalm 71), or the overwhelming need to rescue David, or even the promises of God so much that is at stake here. The reason David cites to prompt God to action is not in David but in God. It is not to vindicate David (which is spoken in many Psalms), it is the need of God to vindicate himself. It is not David's reputation that is on the line, but God's. David is merely a sign; God is the real thing.

David appeals to God's righteousness. Repeatedly.

This is a dangerous thing. The righteousness of God is fierce and has no favorites. David does not proclaim innocence or confess guilt. David wants God to act like God is – righteous. Let the (false) accusers be put to shame, but not me, nor... you.

I will sing of your righteousness.

Which is what David does better than any other. And at the end of this Psalm, which is next to last of the Psalms of David, David the old man says he will proclaim the righteousness of God in song.

Because God will yet save him again in his old age.
Right?

Let's linger for the moment on the insecurity of elderly David here.
Youth has its insecurities – am I strong enough yet, wise enough?
So too does old age – am I strong enough still, sharp enough?

Which insecurity do you have?

Think of the elderly in your family.

How will you help them with this challenge?

Think of the elderly in our church – there are 31 members over 90, two over 100!

How will we support them?

Think of the elderly during this time of virus and thus isolation.

How can we help? How will you?

The teaching of the Faith I think most central in this Psalm is the appeal to the righteousness of God. David may have only come to know this in his old age. Righteousness is not an act but a attribute, less about what one does in a given instance, more about who one is in every instance. This kind of thinking comes to us when we are older. It is less about the 'now' and more about the long sustained and witnessed patterns of a life-time. At our best, reflection characterizes us in our later years. (We tend to bore youth with our reflections.)

Reflect on the righteousness of God witnessed over your lifetime.

What do you know now you didn't know then?

Name the patterns of God's faithfulness to you.

Name the patterns of God's faithfulness to himself.

Finally, there is a reference to the 'now' in this Psalm – David's old age itself. It is being used against him. His accusers are saying 'See how he ages ... he is old ... and further he has not aged well'. David killed a lion and bear in his youth, spent his teens living in caves with scoundrels running from Saul, spent his twenties and thirties and forties in open battle with Philistines and just about every other surrounding hostile nation. Do you think the old man did not have the aches and pains and scars and limitations such a life would inevitably have? David may not have been the handsome, erect, vital man he was in his youth. And his enemies couldn't help but notice and then accuse - God no longer favors David; just look at him. That is not the picture of God's favor. He ain't what he once was.

David does not dispute this. He will protest his innocence sometimes in the Psalms. He will insist that his accusers have no basis for accusations sometimes in the Psalms. But here, he does not protest nor argue, he simply asks God: if I am not what I once was, please God still be who you are – faithful to me, ever righteous.

Got fears of being old? Someone has said 'Old age is not for sissies'.

Pray for God to be God. Now. And life-long.