

Week 10: Christ and the Psalms

Over the past 9 weeks, you might say we have been taking a sightseeing tour of the Book of Psalms. We have looked at several aspects of what they are and how they work. As we have taken that journey we have introduced several connections, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, between Jesus Christ and the psalms. Jesus Christ is the focal point for all the Bible and so it isn't a surprise that we find such connections in the Psalms. In fact, the connections are so varied that it is no wonder that the New Testament writers quote and allude to the Psalms more frequently than any other part of the Old Testament. It has been said that at times when reading the Psalms, the descriptions are so vivid that we might be forgiven for thinking we are reading an account taken directly from one of the Gospel writers.

There are several types of connections between the Psalms and Christ that you might be interested to explore both from a study and devotional standpoint. We certainly cannot cover all of them here, but I want to suggest to you that as you continue to study the Psalms you will increasingly find connections opening to you. My goal here is to highlight a few to help you deepen your appreciation for the connections while also using them practically in your prayer and worship. As we look at these various types of connections please keep in mind that they often overlap with one another. They are not so much a series of individual types of connections so much as like a tapestry that involves several types of connections being weaved together.

Specific Fulfillments

Probably the most common way people think about the relationship between the Psalms and Christ are specific prophetic fulfillments. The New Testament writers and Jesus Himself frequently point out these connections. For example, in Peter's sermon at Pentecost he specifically mentions David as a prophet and applies direct quotations from both Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 to Jesus while also alluding to Psalm 132.

Many of these prophecies, however, are not explicitly mentioned as future predictions by the psalmist. This raises the question as to how we should understand the nature of the prophecy in the Psalms and why the New Testament writers so clearly and confidently made these connections. We will come back to this at the end. For now, let's recognize that there are many details mentioned in the psalms that specifically connect to experiences in the life of Jesus. The following list is nowhere near comprehensive, but I think captures enough to make the point.

Psalm Reference	Connection to Christ	New Testament Reference
2:6	Established in Zion	Heb. 12:22-24
2:7	The Christ will be God's Son (this is also a king reference)	Heb. 1:5-6
8:2	Triumphal Entry	Mt. 21:16
16:8-10	He will be resurrected	Acts 13:35
22:1-21	He will experience extreme suffering (crucifixion)	Mt. 26:27
22:15	He will thirst while suffering	Jn. 19:28
22:16	Will be pierced through	Jn. 20:25
22:18	Evil men will gamble for His clothing	Mt. 27:35, Jn. 19:23-24

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22:22	He will proclaim God's name	Heb. 2:12
34:20	His bones will not be broken	Jn. 19:36-37
40:6-8	He comes to do God's will / Incarnation (39:6 LXX)	Heb. 10:5-7
41:9	He will be betrayed by a close friend	Lk. 22:48
45:2	Proclaimer of grace	Jn. 1:17
45:6-7	His throne will last forever	Heb. 1:8-9
68:18	He will ascend into Heaven	Eph. 4:8-10
69:9	He is zealous for God	Jn. 2:17
69:21	He is given vinegar to drink	Mt. 27:48
72:17	All generations will call Him blessed	Lk. 1:48
89:3-4	Descendant of David	Lk. 1:31-33
96:13	He will return in judgment	1 Thes 1:10
110:1	He is David's son and his Lord	Mt. 22:44
110:4	He is an eternal priest-king	Heb. 6:20
118:22	He is rejected by men but accepted by God	1 Pet. 2:7-8

General Fulfillments

Beyond specific details, there are also several broad Old Testament themes which appear in the psalms that apply to the work or offices of Jesus. As the promise of redemption unfolds throughout the history of the Old Testament there are several components that are introduced as part of that promise. Each of these create both a structure and an anticipation within the life of God's people. They all find their culmination in Jesus who is the solution to the BIG promise and thus ultimately satisfies all the other components. Therefore, as we encounter each of these in the Psalms, they point us to Jesus precisely *through* the experience and expression of the psalmist. Here are just a few examples of these themes we find in the psalms that are fulfilled in Christ.

1. The promised King
2. The promised Prophet
3. The Promised Priest
4. The Temple/Tabernacle
5. The Sacrifices
6. Israel

Just to survey this very quickly, we can see Christ as prophet...

²² I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: (Psalm 22:22)

⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance

in the great congregation;
behold, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.

¹⁰ I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;

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I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation. (Psalm 40:9-10)

We see Him as priest...

⁴The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind,
“You are a priest forever
after the order of Melchizedek.” (Psalm 110:4)

³When iniquities prevail against me,

you atone for our transgressions.

⁴ Blessed is the one you choose and bring near,
to dwell in your courts!
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
the holiness of your temple! (Psalm 65:3-4)

And we see Him as King...

⁶“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”

⁷ I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you. (Psalm 2:6-7)

⁶Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.

⁷ The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; (Psalm 45:6-7)

Covenant Connections

Another general connection that is closely related to what we just talked about are the covenant connections. As the worship songs of a covenant people, drawn primarily from the teachings of the law and prophets of the covenant, the psalms are infused with covenant logic. The blessings that are celebrated in the Psalms come primarily from the covenant promises. The curses that are expressed come primarily from the covenant curses. The psalms are in one sense a working out of the experience of Israel considering the covenants.

The various covenants, Mosaic, Abrahamic, and Davidic all point to the promise of the New Covenant which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

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Fallen/Redeemed Contexts

Another way that the Psalms point us to Jesus is one that I have found very helpful and practical for personal prayer. It requires a little less theological reflection than some of the others and can always be seen within the immediate context of any psalm.

Every single psalm has a “sin-context”. Although we may not ourselves be shepherds, soldiers, or kings and our world in some ways looks very different from that of the psalms there is one very important way in which our experiences are similar. The psalmists and we are living in the context of a fallen world. Sometimes the impact of sin is due to the sins of others, sometimes our own, and sometimes the natural consequences of sin in general but in every case, we share in the experience of being God’s people in a sinful world. By taking a moment to reflect on the sin-context of any psalm we are reading we should be able to identify a similarity between our own experiences and that of the psalmist.

Once we identify our shared sin-context we have identified at least one mutual connection between the psalmist and ourselves. We have also identified a clear connection between the content of that psalm and Jesus Christ. The powerful thing about this approach is it is application intensive. It is not just a connection between the experience of the psalmist and Jesus, but between us and Jesus. In every case, a sin-context leads us to Christ since the cross is both the demonstration of God’s wrath upon sin as well as His grace to those who repent and trust in Christ. Let’s look at an example using Psalm 3. We will just look at the first 4 verses.

- ¹ O LORD, how many are my foes!
 Many are rising against me;
² many are saying of my soul,
 “*There is no salvation for him in God.*” *Selah*
- ³ But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,
 my glory, and the lifter of my head.
⁴ I cried aloud to the LORD,
 and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

You could likely identify several sin-related contexts here, but you only need to pick one that jumps out at you. This is just one example of how you might have approached it.

Sin-Context: There are many who find my trust in God to be foolish and in vain. I can be tempted to doubt God’s promises. I can be tempted to feel alone because there are so many who oppose my faith.

Christ-Connection: I can be confident that there is salvation in God because of what He has done in Jesus Christ. God has already done all that is required for me to be saved and so it doesn’t matter how many find it foolish, God is my glory and the lifter of my head. I called out to God for salvation and He pointed me to His answer. Literally, the answer was provided from his “holy hill” in Jerusalem in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Keep in mind that in some cases, the sin context may be that the psalmist is celebrating deliverance or is praising God in anticipation of deliverance. These also provide us with appropriate connections and applications to ourselves as redeemed people living in a yet sinful world.

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Incarnational Connections

Among the most profound Gospel truths we can ponder is that the Second Person of the Trinity took upon Himself a human nature. The infinite was united to that which came into being. The immortal took on a mortal body. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus, that He became one of us, has significance for nearly every other truth we can understand. It also has implications for how we understand the relationship between Jesus and the Psalms.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. He is also fully human. The author to the Hebrews says,

“¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

You may recall that several weeks ago we discussed the fact that the Psalms were both God’s word to His people as well as being the word of the people to God. The Holy Spirit inspired these words to be lifted up to God *from* His people. Like Jesus, the Bible is both human and divine. The psalms, however, uniquely capture the full range of human feeling and affections. The Bible teaches us that Jesus experienced the full range of what it was to be human. He truly is a human being, but without sin.

In so far as the Psalms give pure expression to the thoughts and emotions of God’s people throughout the range of their experiences, they connect with the thoughts of Christ. When we pray the psalms faithfully, we are praying with Jesus.

I don’t think this is just speculation. Jesus Himself often expressed Himself in the words of the Psalms. We know they frequently captured His thoughts. Perhaps the most striking example of this is when He cries out “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”, quoting from Psalm 22:1 as He is being crucified. We know that it was the Spirit of Christ working in David and the other psalmists that inspired the words they used (1 Peter 1:10-12). In fact, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 22:22 as the words of Jesus. Jesus is literally the embodiment of the praise and worship that is expressed in the Psalms.

The Unfolding Promise (The Flow of Prophecy)

When thinking about things like Christ and the Psalms or even prophetic fulfillment in general we tend to think in terms of instances when it is probably better to think in terms of process. Often, people think of prophecy in the sense that God reveals specific details about the future through a chosen spokesperson. That does happen, but prophecy is a much broader category than that. There are often prophetic connections that are not given as clear prophecies in their original contexts. As we said, this is frequently the case with the psalms.

For example, should we understand the language in some of these psalms to refer to David or to Jesus because several of the connections seem to cross over between them. There is a lot involved in that question so I will try to layout a framework for thinking about it before trying to answer.

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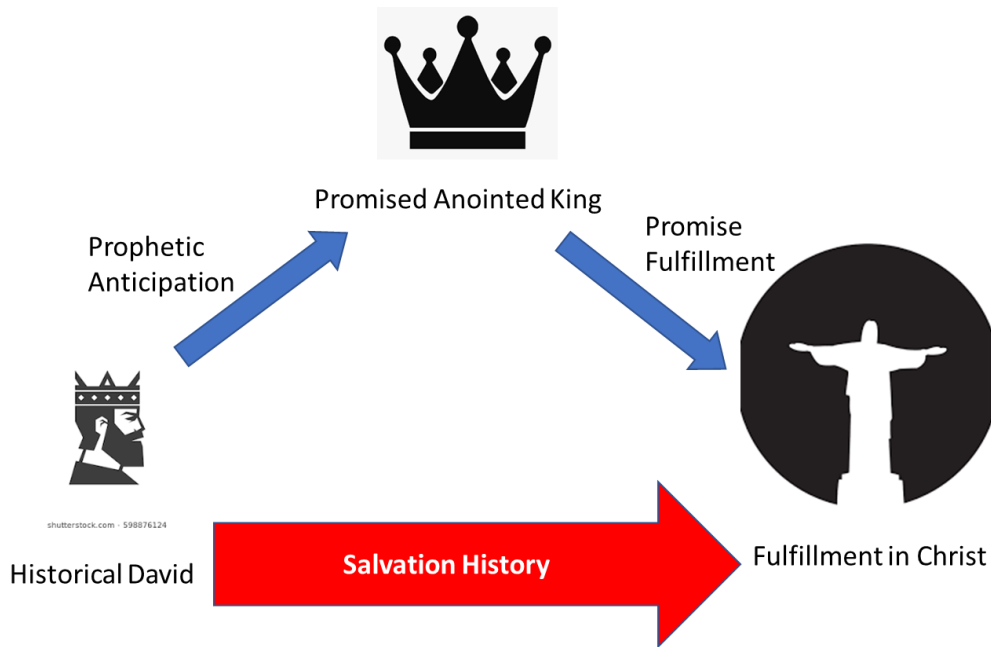
Although there are several authors who contribute to the Psalter, it clearly has a Messianic emphasis. Because of this (and also as a result of it) David is the central figure. It is important that we understand David is functioning as a representative figure. As the anointed King, David represents the people as well as himself. As the King, his words are both his own as well those of God's people. Beyond this, we need to also recognize that David's writings were produced within the context of both David and Israel looking forward to the fulfillment of the promises that were to come through his descendants. The psalms therefore have a representative and a prophetic function. They are therefore not simply historical records of David's thoughts. This becomes clear through the fact that they were used as the songs of praise for the people of Israel. There was a recognition that these psalms had a function and a fulfillment that transcended David. This function also goes beyond being simply an example of Godly worship in that the promises they point to were yet to be realized in the life of Israel.

The promise David receives that an heir of his will always rule was not just a promise to David but is part of the promise to Israel that God will provide them a righteous king. David and his immediate descendants could not be the one(s) who satisfied that promise because the fullness of them was never achieved. With the establishment of David as King, however, God had begun to bring about that fulfillment. David proves God was working to keep the promise and was also a part of the process through which it would be kept. In David, God's people could see a glimpse of what God was working toward.

The structure of the promise was such that the best would come after David. The following kings, however, all proved to fall short. David therefore remained the prototype of the Godly king that would one day be surpassed by the Promised King that God would provide.

The following diagram shows the relationship in terms of promise-fulfillment and history.

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David is a prophet in the sense of revealing information but is also himself part of the process that will bring about the fulfillment. That is why Matthew's Gospel begins with the genealogy that links David to Jesus. Any faithful Jew would immediately recognize the significance of that genealogy.

The answer to the question then is that the Davidic psalms should be understood to be the experiences of David but recognizing that in writing about his experience David is prophesying about the more perfect King to come. The immediate context and the future realization are bound together within the framework of a single unfolding promise, of which the line of David is a part.

As I said earlier, we should not think of the prophetic word as distinct points as if at one point in time there is a prophecy made and then that word is inactive until some future point when it is fulfilled. Rather, we should think of prophesy itself as part of the progression of the working out of the Promise God made to redeem and restore His creation and His people. We first see the Promise in Genesis 3:15. As the Bible continues, we see more information as the Promise is expanded and restated. But, the important thing for us to understand is that the "salvation history" the Bible records is not just what happens between the promise and its fulfillment but is the process through which the promise is being fulfilled.

Walter Kaiser says it this way, *"God was not only predicting what would happen in the future; he was mightily working out his promise-plan in the everyday course of events as the very means by which he would bring about the final fulfillment. This was no wasted filler; it was part of the fulfillment in the process of history: the means by which the predicted word and the fulfilled event were bound together."*

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It is therefore better to see David as part of the process of the unfolding promise and prophecy than as a starting point. He was conscious that he was part of a larger unfolding history that would come to realization through one of his descendants. The patterns we see in the Psalms are similar in this way to what we find in the other Old Testament prophets. The New Testament writers are confident in making these applications because they understood that this was part of the intended meaning of the writings left by the Old Testament authors.

There is no need for double-fulfillments or hidden meanings that go beyond the plain words and contexts of the psalmists. Rather, the original recipients proclaimed in their use of the psalms the same promise as Christians do, although we do so with a fuller understanding of how and in whom God would bring it about.

Consider the implications of the following passages on this question.

1 Peter 1:10-12

“¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

Romans 15:4

“⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction...”

Hebrews 11:39-40

“³⁹ And all these [O.T. heroes of faith], though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

Acts 26:22-23

“²² To this day I [Paul] have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

Acts 2:23-25,

“²³ this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. ²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. ²⁵ For David says concerning him, ...”

Acts 2:29-31

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²⁹ “Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰ Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹ he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.” (Acts 2:23-25, 29-31)

Therefore, when the New Testament writers apply the language of the Psalms to Jesus, they are doing so according to the intention of the Old Testament author and they are frequently drawing not just on the single verse they quote but the entire development of those concepts as they have been developed throughout the Old Testament.

In Luke 24:44, after His resurrection, Jesus says to His followers, ““These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” He then began to open their minds to understand the Scripture. Those Scriptures, including these psalms point to Him both in specific prophetic details as well as in the fact that He is the person who satisfies all they long for and celebrate.