

## The Psalms of Asaph

### 1. **Who was Asaph?**

- a. Asaph was a prominent Levite singer, musician, and “seer” featured prominently in the books of Chronicles
  - i. 1 Chron 6:39 – David appointed Asaph “the son of Berechiah” as assistant to Heman the main musician and singer of the choir
  - ii. I Chron 15:17 -- same as 6:39
  - iii. I Chron 15:19 – Asaph played the cymbals of brass “to sound out loud”
  - iv. I Chron 16:1-7 – David appointed Asaph as “the chief” to “minister before the Ark of the Covenant”, play the cymbals of brass, and “David gave thanks unto YHWH by the hand of Asaph and his brethren”
  - v. 2 Chron 5:12 – Asaph is credited with performing at the dedication of Solomon’s temple; one of the “singers”
  - vi. 2 Chron 29:25-30 – In Hezekiah’s reign the Levites played cymbals, psalteries, harps, and trumpets; and the Levites “sang praises to YHWH with the words of David and of Asaph the seer”
    1. This Hebrew word “seer” (chozeh) suggests that Asaph may have also been considered a prophet
- b. Another OT Asaph – “the recorder” – Isa 36: 3, 22
- c. The temple singers came to be known as “the Asaphites”
- d. Asaph’s descendants formed an important guild of temple singers in the reconstruction following the exile
  - i. Ezra 2:41 – “the singers, the children of Asaph, a hundred and twenty and eight”
  - ii. Neh 7:44 – “the singers, the children of Asaph, a hundred forty and eight”

- iii. Neh 11:44 – “...the sons of Asaph, the singers, over the business of the house of God”

## 2. **Basic Themes of Asaph’s Psalms**

- a. Judgment from God
- b. Challenge to follow the Law of God
- c. Communal Laments for the well-being of the faithful
- d. Cries to God for help
- e. Remember, do NOT forget, God’s great mercy in the past

## 3. **A New Way to Pray/Praise God**

- a. Heuristic Bias (mental shortcuts) and our prayer life--
  - i. Our tendency to do things the way we’ve always done them without really thinking – step up on a curb, put signal on to turn left, etc etc
  - ii. Prayers can become thoughtless – repeat prayer clichés and end with Amen!
- b. Psalmists tell us repeatedly to “sing a new song” – applies to prayers too!
- c. Jesus warns us “when you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again. Don’t be like them, for your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!” Matt 6:7 NLT
- d. The 12 Psalms of Asaph were prayer songs unlike any others in the Psalter
  - i. Use of Selah – best translation of this “pause and think about what was just said”
  - ii. Antiphonal singing of the Psalms – all 150 are sung every two weeks at the Abbey of Gethsemane in KY (Trappist Monastery, home of Thomas Merton)
  - iii. Honesty and vulnerability are the hallmarks of all 12 of these Psalms of Asaph
- e. When prayers are answered we need to turn those answers into praise; otherwise the answers may turn into pride. Asaph’s prayers always and only give God the glory.
- f. Praise prayers are meant to be shared, the testimony to our memory of God’s acts; again, if kept silent they fuel pride,

but if shared they fuel the glory of God, per all of Asaph's prayers.

4. **Psalm 50**

- a. Sacrificial actions by themselves are not sufficient.
- b. God's rebuke for not obeying Him.
- c. God wants "offering of thanksgiving" over "burnt offerings"
- d. Israel had focused on the prescribed offerings yet had neglected a real connection or devotion to God

5. **Psalm 73**

- a. Divine providence and battle within one's soul are the two main themes
- b. Why do the wicked seem to prosper
- c. How the righteous should respond to corruption
- d. Scandals abound when leaders abuse power and privileges
- e. Entry to the Miqdash (holy place, i.e. sanctuary, church) made all things clear -verse 17 sets all things right!

6. **Psalm 74**

- a. A Cry Out to God for salvation from the depths of despair
- b. Agony of the nation in a shattering disaster
- c. Amidst the cries of despair there is a voice of praise to God
- d. Similarities with the book of Lamentations

7. **Psalm 75**

- a. Huge mood change and the promise to sing the praises of God "forever"
- b. The wicked will be humbled and the righteous will be exalted
- c. A song of thanksgiving for deliverance from peril
- d. The LXX has a new title "A Song Concerning the Assyrians" which may reflect the defeat of the Assyrian invasion of Judea by Sennacherib.

8. **Psalm 76**

- a. The defeat of Israel's foe is a glorification of God's name
- b. Elaboration of the incredible saving power of God
- c. Calls the people to worship and praise to God

d. Calls for thanksgiving to the Lord

9. **Psalm 77**

- a. Loud cries for God not to be silent in our need
- b. Incredibly deep anguish of the people
- c. I moan with pain and grief
- d. Only memory of God's past wonders lifts us out of despair
- e. God led His people on a path which was not known

10. **Psalm 78**

- a. A "didactic" psalm, tracing the history of God's chosen people from their stay in Egypt to the reign of David.
- b. Here is the pattern of God's saving mercy.
- c. Pass down to each generation the mighty deeds of God
- d. Calls to mind the time of Moses and the Israelites in the desert.

11. **Psalm 79**

- a. The importance of prayer in the midst of calamity
- b. Destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 587BC
- c. This lament of the community acknowledges their faults and begs for God's mercy
- d. Recited on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab with fasting, commemorating the event when Jerusalem was reduced to ashes

12. **Psalm 80**

- a. A prayer for Israel's restoration
- b. Sometimes this Psalm is called "a testimony to Asaph"
- c. Hope for restoration is combined with a memory of great sorrow
- d. Images of Israel as a vineyard and God as a shepherd

13. **Psalm 81**

- a. Praising a God who saves
- b. Calling for a national return to liturgy in worship
- c. Choosing to act on the desires and wants of humans rather than walking with God and being in His favor
- d. If we want God's protection then we have to repent

14. **Psalm 82**
  - a. Elohim = God; elohim = judges/angels (verse 1)
  - b. Judgment comes BOTH from human judges and from God
  - c. Notice the strong bonds between moral and physical order
  - d. God rebukes unjust kings and judges who do not treat the poor with respect
  - e. Last verse calls from a prayer for justice
  
15. **Psalm 83**
  - a. The last Psalm of Asaph highlights the lament of the people due to their fear of the Babylonian invasion
  - b. God is in control of all occurrences
  - c. Prayer for the current enemy of Israel to be destroyed as were all the enemies of the past were destroyed
  - d. Not a spirit of vindictiveness but rather so that the world may see that God's rule is supreme to all the world
  
16. **Conclusion**
  - a. "What's Past is Prologue" [statue on the National Archives in Washington DC]
    - i. Can the lack of "awe" and "excitement" in our churches be attributed to absence of testimony?
    - ii. What gets "celebrated" gets "replicated" – stories of how God worked lead to new acts of God working.
    - iii. Testimonies often double as prophecies.
    - iv. The church is edified by testimonies, and boring sermons come alive when the speaker goes vulnerable and honest!
      1. First person testimony is always credible
      2. ... whereas second person testimony may be true but it is not as powerful or reliable and it **always** holds less probative weight (= hearsay, with a ton of rules and exceptions!!)
  - b. Nothing makes sense of how evil prospers until...
    - i. ...we enter the "holy sanctuary"
    - ii. ...and "remember" how God has faithfully worked in the past. Ps. 73:16.
    - iii. Memory is the key!

- c. Honesty is always the best policy, in prayers especially since God already knows!
- d. The vulnerability reflected in Asaph's psalms is not easily found in our lives...
  - i. Apart from a spiritual director
  - ii. Or a small group
- e. Second hand faith is as dangerous as second hand smoke; we cannot live vicariously off the faith of our fathers forever.
  - i. Asaph saw his beloved Jerusalem in ashes and the temple destroyed; his faith was tested and passed the test!
  - ii. Get a testimony, share a testimony, be honest with God, and never give way to failed memory of how God has acted.
- f. My kidney stone testimony!