

Bible-Reading Coach Podcast Transcript

Week 27: Psalms 107-150 Book V

Week 27 of the Bible reading coach podcast. My name is Karl Vaters and I'm here to help you read through the entire Bible in 52 weeks.

Well, last week, you may not have noticed this, but we passed the halfway point in your Bible! Yup, as of this week you have less than half of the Bible left to go. And some of the great stuff is still coming. Because about half of the remaining half, about a quarter of your Bible, is the New Testament. So we're two thirds of the way to Jesus. We're halfway through the entire Bible at this point.

But first, this week, we're going to finish our reading through the Psalms. And before we do that, before we take a look at a passage or two from today, let me answer one last question that you may have had about the Psalms. And that is, when were the Psalms written? And then after they were written, when were they assembled? These are two different questions.

So first of all, when were the Psalms written? Well, they were written over a really long span of time, starting with Moses, Psalm 90 says it was written by Moses. So that means around 1500 BCE. Most of them were written by David and Solomon. And around that time, so we're talking 1050 to 1000 BC, and it ends at the time of Nehemiah, around 450 BC. So it takes about 1000 years for all of these psalms to have been written, which is about the entire length that it takes to write the entire Old Testament. So the Psalms were being written during the entire time that the whole Old Testament was being written. It was probably assembled at the time that the rest of the Old Testament was assembled between the Testaments by the rabbis during the period of the exile, and after the well after the exile between the Testaments. That was when it was assembled. By the time Jesus shows up the Psalms, and the entire Old Testament exists as we have it today. So when Jesus talks about "The Scriptures", he's referring to the entire Old Testament, including the Psalms, as we currently have them today. So that gives you an idea of where they came from.

But as you're getting into the passage this week, and we'll be taking a look at the last 20 or so, actually 40 or so; 43 To be specific, Psalms, take note of three points as you read this last group of Psalms this week. First of all, you're going to see the shortest Psalm in Psalm 117. It only consists of two verses. Then two Psalms later, you're going to see the longest Psalm. Psalm 119, is the longest Psalm, it's also the longest chapter in the Bible. It is a Psalm of praise about the Bible. So the longest chapter and the longest Psalm in the Bible is a Psalm of praise about the Bible. In it, you'll see passages like this, beginning with verse 11, "I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." Verse 89, "Your word, Lord, is eternal. It stands firm in the heavens." Verse 105, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path." Verse 167, "I obey Your statutes, for I love them greatly."

Plus, as you go through it, you're going to notice this. Every few verses, there's a Hebrew letter before the verse is just standing all by itself, and the English name for the Hebrew letter. So at the beginning, you'll see Aleph, then before verse nine you'll see Beth, before verse 17 you'll see Gimel, before verse 25 you'll see Daleth. Now, what is that? Those are the Hebrew letters and the way to pronounce those Hebrew letters in English, and they are in ABC order, or, you know, Hebrew version of ABC order. So Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth are the first four letters

in the Hebrew alphabet. So it goes through the entire Hebrew alphabet and then under the Aleph section, every stanza of that section begins with the letter Aleph.

Every stanza under the Beth section begins with the letter Beth, if it was an English, for instance, you would have the first section of it would be the first like eight verses. Every stanza in those eight verses would begin with "A", so it would be A, A, A, A, A. Next segment, all the stanza start with "B", B, B, B, B, B. So in English, you'd see if you look down the left side of the stanzas you'd see A, A, A, A, A, B, B, B, B, B, C, C, C, C, C. That's how it's written in Hebrew. We don't see it in English because when you translate it from Hebrew into English, we use different letters, different words, and so you don't see it. There have been a couple attempts that I've seen where people have done it in English, where all of the stanzas in the first one start with A all of them in the second one start with B. The problem with that is, there are no English equivalents for most of those. And so it really gets awkward, and you lose the meaning. And the meaning is more important than the poetry. But that's how that is arranged. It's a really fascinating arrangement of poetry for Psalm 119.

So, it's the shortest Psalm you'll see the longest Psalm and all that about it when you get there. And then the third point to note is, after Psalm 119, you're going to see a bunch of Psalms with this title, "A Song of Ascents", A Song of Ascents. And if you're hearing this, I'm not reading a cent doesn't mean a penny, two letters "a cent", it's "ascent" as in ascending a hill. And here's what they mean. The city of Jerusalem where the temple was located, is on a hill. And when people would come from all around Israel to come to the temple, for almost all of their journey to Jerusalem, they'd be walking uphill, they'd be ascending. And so Psalms were written for them to sing, as they were ascending the hill towards Jerusalem, as they were going to a festival or coming to the temple to offer their sacrifices, or coming to a feast and a festival in order to have a holiday and to praise God. So as they are ascending the hill towards Jerusalem, these are the songs that the people would sing. So they are psalms of ascent and we know that because they're designated as "Here are the songs that you sing as you're ascending the hill towards Jerusalem", to either offer a sacrifice for your sins or to celebrate a festival, or most of the time when they came, they did both.

Now, the most well known of the Psalm of Ascents, for most of us, is Psalm 121. So let me read it for you and listen to the physically ascending parts of it. Imagine yourself as an ancient Jewish Pilgrim, heading towards the temple, walking uphill day after day after day, closer and closer towards the temple of God and singing this Psalm 121. A song of Ascent, verse 1, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, He will not let your foot slip." Think about that, as you're actually climbing a mountain, right? He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep, the Lord watches over you, the Lord is your shade at your right hand. Imagine that in the heat of the day, right in the desert, the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night, there are pilgrims, they're walking, they have to camp at night. They're worried about everything from bears to robbers, right? And it says, Don't worry, I'll protect you. As you're heading towards My House. Verse 7, "The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life, the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore." So as you read anything that's labeled a song or a song of ascent, pay attention to the fact that they were actually singing these as they physically walked for days and nights, up to Jerusalem, to the festivals and to the temple.

All right. Now, before we conclude this week, let's get into this. Psalm 137. We mentioned it a couple of weeks ago that we were coming to it, because Psalm 137, verse 9 is maybe the most difficult verse in the Psalms, for us to wrap our minds and our emotions around. Psalm 137, verse 9, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Oh boy, just like last week, we looked at the "you are all gods" thing, and we saw how people use that, cynics and skeptics use it as a way to criticize scripture. This is another one of those things that are used to attack scripture with. How do we, how do we figure this out? How do we make sense of this? "Happy as the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks?" Here's how. First of all we have to remember, the Psalms are not God speaking to us. They're us speaking to God, including sometimes in our anger and our hatred. Secondly, remember that because of who's speaking here, these songs don't necessarily tell us God's will. Is not God speaking to us, it's us speaking to God. Thirdly, remember, this was spoken in a revenge culture. Okay? That's how people behave towards each other. It wasn't right, God's word comes against it. But he allowed them to express their desire for revenge, even in the Psalms.

And then ask yourself this. Why is it that this verse is so horrible to us? Why do we... in a revenge culture, they didn't see this as horrible, they saw this as payback. You kill my kids, I'll kill your kids and I'll be happy when I do. Right? That's not correct. That's not right. That's not moral. But it's the way their culture worked. So why doesn't our culture work that way? Why do we look at this and automatically go, that's horrible. Here's why. Because we know this is against the nature of God. And we know it because the rest of Scripture tells us that. And we know that it's especially against the teachings of Jesus, who told us to care for the young, who told us to care for the vulnerable. It is the Bible itself that tells us that this section is horrible. But again, we got to recognize this section is not like, hey, the rest of the Bible says babies are awesome and this part says, kill babies. No, the rest of the Bible says babies are awesome and to be protected by God. This Psalm shows the heart of an evil person who wants revenge instead of going God's way. It's not God speaking to us. It's a person in anger and hatred speaking to God. And God, of course, does not grant those wishes. Plus, it's also a Psalm, the entire Psalm itself. The Psalm is a Psalm of remembering how horribly they were treated as slaves in Babylon. And this verse commemorates the eventual defeat of Babylon, which included such acts. The Babylonians did this to their children, so they were angry and wanted to do that back to them.

So read it in context. Take a look, that's verse 9 of chapter 137. Let's take a look starting with verse 1 of chapter 137. starts this way, "By the rivers of Babylon. We sat and wept when we remembered Zion." This was written in Babylon when they were enslaved after their children had been stolen from them, and they sit down and they weep remembering that they used to be free in Jerusalem. Verse 2, "There, on the poplars, we hung our hearts." So they're sitting in Babylon, they want to sing songs of rejoicing, but they're too sad so they take their very instruments and they just hang them on a tree. Right verse 3, why? "For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy." So they were taken as slaves, and then the slave owners look at the slaves and go, hey, you've got an instrument, sing us a happy song, and they go, No, I'm not singing you a happy song, you just killed my kids and you took me into slavery. I'm just going to hang my guitar up on the tree here. They said, sing us one of the songs of Zion and their response in verse 4 was, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord

while in a foreign land?" So this entire chapter, when you read it in context, is a chapter of sorrow and of anger and frustration, and quite frankly, of hatred that they had towards the Babylonians. They're expressing that hatred in absolutely unfiltered terms. This doesn't mean that God approves of their hatred, but he understands that, he understands why we feel this way, and he gives us a better alternative.

So, does the Bible say "Happy is he who sees your infants and dashes them against the rocks?" Yes, that phrase is in the Bible, but God does not say it or approve of it. But he allows us to express even our hatred to him. Because once we've expressed it, and we come to God with it, then he can direct us to a better way. That's what this is all about. But let's finish this week and our entire reading of the Psalms by closing with what may be the most joyful of songs and I can't think of a better way to end this teaching on the Psalms, especially after talking about that miserable Psalm 137, than to simply quote the last Psalm for you.

Psalm 150. "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise Him in His mighty heavens. Praise Him for His acts of power. Praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet. Praise him with the harp and lyre. Praise him with timbrel and dancing. Praise him with the strings and pipe. Praise him with the clash of cymbals. Praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!"

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