Ezra-Nehemiah; Esther; the Psalms

In the last lesson we looked at the book of Chronicles and talked somewhat about the traditional view that Ezra authored both the books of the Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah. I made a case last time, which I will continue to press, that there is a large overlap in concerns. We talked about how the book of 2 Chronicles ends where the book of Ezra begins. Cyrus’ edict ends Chronicles and begins Ezra in 538 BC. It was not until 515 BC that the temple was rebuilt and rededicated, therefore there was a good bit of time where there was great opposition and difficulty. Just imagine being completely dispossessed for over a generation and then coming back to reestablish a land and rebuild a temple. Later Nehemiah undertook the rebuilding of the walls. Of course we the Samaritans came in there. This is where the great conflict with the Samaritans began. The northern kingdom of Israel took off in 722 BC. The Assyrians conquered Samaria, and the strategy at that time for the Assyrians was to take away the leaders and leave some of the poorer people and farmers. Then they repopulated the land with other people groups so it bastardized the race and made it a mixed race. We see that that group of people was well established with their own governor under Persian rule after the change of power from Babylon to Assyria and then to Persia. These people did not want to see the rebuilding of the temple, and they did not want to see a strong Judah. The people who came back in return with Ezra and Nehemiah were met with strong opposition.

The great overlap of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah is the concern for the temple. It is obvious that the primary word that we hear loud and clear is “rebuild the temple.” You cannot read Ezra-Nehemiah or about Haggai and Zechariah, who ministered at the same time, and not get that message. That is clearly the message in the way that the chronicler retells the history of David and Solomon and the divided kingdom. The centrality and importance of the temple is emphasized.

Remember that one of the emphases of Chronicles, aside from the temple, is Davidic kingship and leadership. We see in the first returnees with Zerubbabel and Joshua is an emphasis on reestablishing Davidic leadership. The chronicler’s voice speaks into that very strongly. When we get to Ezra-Nehemiah, which was written almost 100 years later, then there is no emphasis on the kingship. The emphasis is still on the temple, but it is also on the law and reforms that need to take place in the priesthood under Ezra and Nehemiah. Let us talk about that now.

We do not know whether or not Ezra helped to compile Chronicles. Because we have some differences between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, we should appreciate the unique voice they have in the canon. They speak in unique ways to the needs of God’s people at different times. Chronicles speak to the first returnees, and Ezra-Nehemiah speaks to those who returned a generation later. In some ways this latter group had given up on the idea of the Davidic king. The focus was on getting the temple and the priesthood reestablished.

Another difference that is quite important for Ezra-Nehemiah is the large sections in Ezra and Nehemiah that are in the first person. That is another literary difference that indicates that we have large memoirs from Ezra and from Nehemiah. Ezra speaks “I, I,” and oftentimes Nehemiah speaks “we, we.” He speaks in the first-person plural, but both speak in the first person. That is another difference that we have between Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles that we should attend to. For those reasons I would suggest, as I did in the last lesson, that these two books, 1 and 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, which are treated as one book until we get to origin, have overlapping concerns but also have a somewhat distinct voice in the canon that we should appreciate.
A good memory verse is Ezra 7:10, which says, “Ezra devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” This has been tremendously convicting for me because my job is to teach. You are reading this because many of you are already involved in teaching ministries or have been called to teaching ministries in some form. I would have us all attend to the order of this. The order is very important—that is, to the study, the doing, and the teaching. We should really meditate on the order and come back to it again and again. I think Ezra is a model for us of what a teacher of God’s Word is called to. Ongoing study is observance, action, enactment, and performance. Then comes the teaching.

The purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah is to encourage the returnees to maintain the reforms initiated by Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah despite strong opposition and economic hardships and even though Israel’s former glory has not yet been restored. Ezra returned in 458 BC, and Nehemiah returned about 12 years later, in 445 BC. These books are focused on covenant faithfulness rather than kingship. We see some particular issues that are particularly troublesome. One of the important themes that we have at the beginning is divine authorization to rebuild the temple. That is emphasized over and over again. Before we get to that, in Ezra 1 through 6 the temple is reestablished against opposition, and the law is reestablished in Ezra 7 through 10. The city is secured against opposition in Nehemiah 1 through 7, and the law is further established to secure order in Nehemiah 8 through 13. There are two types of threats that are talked about here. They are internal threats of corruption and unfaithfulness and external threats of opposition.

The first thing that is really emphasized in Ezra is the divine authorization for the rebuilding of the temple. I will not read it, but if you notice carefully the Cyrus edict is not on the basis of Cyrus’ authority. It is on the basis of Yahweh’s authority: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me the kingdoms of the earth.” Right away we get a sense that this authorization to rebuild comes from the Lord Himself. In Ezra 3 we can see that the altar is rebuilt fairly quickly, within the first year, during the seventh month. The Israelites settled in their towns, people assembled in Jerusalem, and Jeshua and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel. They sacrificed burnt offerings on it in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God. Despite their fear in the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and the evening sacrifices. Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the feast of tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. We see within the first year in the seventh month the importance of rebuilding the altar. Then we have the appointing of the Levites to supervise the building of the temple in Ezra 3:8.

Notice Ezra 3:12, “Many of the older priests and Levites and family heads who had seen the former temple wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.” We have both praise and sorrow because of the awareness that this temple was not in keeping with the glory of the former temple. We note that God’s people are still under Persian rule, and they still have to pay Persian taxes. That is a theme that we see, especially in Nehemiah and in the prayers of God’s people.

I will say a little bit more about the opposition in Ezra 4 soon, but in keeping with divine authorization for rebuilding, look in Ezra 5. Notice the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah the prophet. Ezra 5:1 says, “Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of God of Israel who was over them. Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, son of Jozadak, set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were helping them.” Over and over again are indications through Cyrus, the people whom God had appointed (Zerubbabel and Jeshua), and the prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah of divine authorization for the rebuilding of
the temple.

In the midst of that we have already alluded to the fact that there was some opposition. Turn to Ezra 4:1, which says, “When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and they said, ‘Let us help you build because like you we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.’ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of the families answered, ‘You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia commanded us.’” In this we see a strategy of subversion that begins. The peoples set out to discourage the people of Judah and to make them afraid to go on building. It is a strategy of intimidation. In verse 5 they hire counselors to work against them to frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus, king of Persia, down to the reign of Darius. It was a psychological campaign of misinformation. It was a whispering campaign, if you remember from Numbers when Balaak hired Balaam to prophesy against them as they journeyed through. It was a hiring of others to try to break the incentive of God’s people and to intimidate them in the rebuilding of the temple. Then the governors Tabeel and others send letters to Artaxerxes. They send these letters in the diplomatic language of the region at the time, which was Aramaic. They express their concerns about the rebuilding project, and they bring up a history of rebellion on the part of the Jews. In Ezra 4:23 we see that “as soon as a copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai, the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them to stop by force.” There is a work stoppage order, and there is a bureaucracy in Persia. They cannot keep up with what is going on in the outlying territories, so they have lost track of the record of what happened. They have new kings managing there, and there is a diplomatic envoy from Samaria complaining. That is why there is a work stoppage under Artaxerxes.

We have the same sort of communication going on when Darius becomes king in Ezra 5. Notice in Ezra 6 that Darius makes a search of the archives, and they find Cyrus’ decree. What we see in Ezra 6:13-15 is wonderful. It is a wonderful account, “Then because of the decree King Darius had sent Tattenai, governor of trans Euphrates, so the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai and the prophet Zechariah, and they finished the building of the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. The temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the King Darius.” In 515 BC the temple was completed. The Samaritans were the primary opposition externally to the rebuilding of the temple.

Something that is very interesting becomes a prominent theme when we get to Nehemiah. It has already been a prominent theme, so I want to remind us of it. We talked about the land in the last lesson and the importance of the land. One of the things that I want to underscore is how important covenant faithfulness was to the economy of Israel. The importance of that was not just spiritual. We see in our own economy right now that people are only willing to take so much risk when they make investments. That is painfully obvious to all of us. What the law does is create an environment where people know what they can count on if those laws are exercised and enforced. It is not just about the spiritual relationship with God. It is about following His law in that spiritual and ethical sense, but there is also the wider social economy that creates trust so people can transact business. God’s intention to bless us is to provide that sort of environment and economy. The church and people of God need to be an important instrument in the way that we start businesses and provide jobs. The people of God in Israel were that sort of instrument as well for the land of Palestine. A new economy was restored and created as the people of Israel came back. That economy had as its head Yahweh, the Lord of Israel, the Lord who created all nations and whose plan and covenantal intentions concerned all nations through His chosen
people Israel.

When we come to these reforms under Ezra and Nehemiah, take note that the reforms not only had to do with worshiping the right God—that is why interreligious marriage was a big problem that Ezra had to confront very strongly. Also if you notice under Nehemiah, the practice of usury was also confronted very strongly. Usury was charging interest to fellow Jews. Here they were trying to restart an economy. On the one hand you have to stand guard and plant crops while with your other hand you have to put bricks in the rebuilding of the wall. The picture that we are given in Nehemiah is of the family clans standing next to each other. Some stand watch and some build, and they take turns. In the midst of a famine and of external threat from the Samaritans, there was intertribal interest-charging going on. It is like they said, “Your field is not producing crops. You can have some of my crops, but I will charge you interest for the use of my land.” Nehemiah says, “Absolutely not. That violates the Nahalah legislation that we saw in Leviticus and Numbers about who the land belongs to. This is God’s land, and He distributes it to the tribes.” That is what the whole jubilee legislation was about. The law of God is concerned with religious matters, but it is also concerned with social matters. Those things are really intertwined.

In Ezra 7 and 8 we have the return of Ezra and his commission. Ezra 7:10 is a good memory verse, but notice verse 25. This is the instruction from Artaxerxes and the letter that Ezra carried with him: “And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all of the people of the Trans-Euphrates, all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.” Notice that Ezra’s charge at this point in the history of God’s people is to teach the law and appoint judges and magistrates who will carry out justice and create this environment of an economy of trust where business can be transacted.

Let me briefly draw your attention to Ezra 8:15 and a few other verses. Ezra, as a teacher of the law, assembles everyone and calls a fast. Notice he speaks in the first person. Verses 15-24 say, “I assembled them at the canal that flows through Ahava […] I summoned Eliezer […] I proclaimed a fast […] I set apart twelve of the leading priests.” In Ezra 9 when he leads prayers of repentance and tears his clothes about the intermarriage that takes place, he speaks in the first person. Ezra 9:3 says, “When I heard this I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled my hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.” Notice his prayer, “My God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you because our sins are higher than our heads.” In the same way that Moses interceded for the people, notice the way in which Ezra intercedes. He does not pray about “those nasty people over there.” He prays corporately, saying, “we” and “our sins are over our heads.” Ezra 10 is the public confession of sin and a listing of those who are guilty of intermarriage. In Ezra is the rebuilding of the temple and the clarity of divine authorization about that. As you can see, the focus is on legal reform. That continues to be the focus in Nehemiah, although Nehemiah takes a broader scope of rebuilding the city wall.

Nehemiah begins in the first person with interlocking memoirs. Ezra 7 through 10 is in the first person, and Ezra also has memoirs in Nehemiah 8 through 10. Nehemiah 1 through 7 and 11 through 13 are all in the first person. We see that in Susa, the capital of Persia, we have this report of the wall of Jerusalem in disrepair in Nehemiah 1:3. Susa is also where the story of Esther takes place. Then we have the weeping and mourning followed by Nehemiah’s request to King Artaxerxes in Nehemiah 2 to return and rebuild the wall. Verse 4 says, “If it pleases the king, if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him
send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.” We have at the end of verse 10 this hint at outside opposition. In the same way that we have the Samaritans opposing the rebuilding of the temple, the next group of Samaritans, with Sanballat in leadership, opposes the rebuilding of the wall. Verse 10 says, “When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.” The great cities of the ancient Near East protected themselves by having a wall around the city to give themselves time to defend against enemies who came. This is true all the way up through the medieval period. It was very important to the military and for economic security to have this wall.

In the rebuilding of the temple and the wall, we see a rebuilding of the identity of the people of God. It is a reshaping of the identity of the people of God. That is impossible without a real covenantal return to Torah. In Ezra and Nehemiah, particularly Nehemiah 9—which is one of the longest, most convicting, and most beautiful prayers of repentance in the whole of the Scriptures—we see calls to deep repentance. There are also calls for a return to covenant faithfulness, which includes religious loyalty and absolute fidelity to Yahweh in putting away idols. The whole controversy over intermarriage is really about absolute loyalty to Yahweh. It is about keeping the first commandment. It is not interracial marriage that is the problem. Let us get this straight. We have other examples in the Old Testament of interracial marriage. We just read the book of Ruth, so it should be fresh on your mind. Interracial marriage is not the issue. It is interreligious marriage that is the issue, and it is still the issue. “Be not unequally yoked,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. He does not warn them against interracial marriage but against interreligious marriage. That is what he means. This return to the covenant includes full fidelity to Yahweh. It also includes loving your neighbor and the social aspects of Torah keeping and the way in which the tribes were to treat one another. That is what we see with the whole business about usury at the end of Nehemiah.

We talked about the opposition to rebuilding from Sanballat, which continues in Nehemiah 4. In Nehemiah 5 we get the first hints about this problem from Nehemiah: “The men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous. In order for us to eat and stay alive we must get grain.’ Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our homes to get grain during the famine.’ Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we were powerless because our fields and vineyards belonged to others.’” How do you engage in a mortgage in a subsistence economy if you do not have money from the sale of goods? You become an indentured servant and work for someone else, and your sons and daughters work for someone else. That is a mortgage in a subsistence economy. We get the good news at the end of Nehemiah 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 about the completion of the wall.

We have a very important event in Nehemiah 8. There are two chapters to know in Nehemiah, and chapter 8 is the reading of the law. Ezra and Nehemiah are together at the public reading of the law in keeping with the requirements of the covenant in Deuteronomy. Nehemiah 8:4 says, “Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on the right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah […] Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, all the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen, amen,’ and they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” Notice what happens next, because this is very important. Leviticus 8 through 10 teaches the primary responsibilities of the priests and the Levites. Nehemiah 8:7 says,
The Levites [...] instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep,” for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drink, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

This great event celebrated not only the fact that the temple had been rebuilt, but that the wall had been rebuilt, and the infrastructure of pastoral care had been rebuilt. We have the Levites doing their job. We have people who have repented of sin, and there has been the public reading of the law in the keeping with the requirements of Deuteronomy. We have a very important moment in the history of the returnees.

The response in Nehemiah 9 is confession of sin. That is led by Nehemiah. In verse 5 the Levites say, “Stand up and praise the Lord your God. Blessed be the glorious name and be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You are the Lord who chose Abraham.” We have this whole retelling of the history of Israel. We have the rebuilding of the temple, the wall, the call to repentance, and then the telling of the story of the family history. All of these things are very important pastoral tools that you and I must also use. We are called to the same sorts of things. We are called to be instruments of God’s grace to shape the identity of the people of God. That is what we are called to do, and that is what discipleship is all about. It is about shaping the identity of the people of God and calling ourselves, our families, and our churches to be who we are. There is no way to do that if we forget our story. We need to reenact our story in worship every Sunday and reenact our story as God’s people here.

Notice that the Israelites had the feast of tabernacles when they first established the altar again. The feast of tabernacles tells the story of the Exodus and being in the wilderness. God brought them back into the land, and they no longer had to live in booths because God brought them back as returnees to the land. All of these things are means of grace for shaping the identity of the people of God. That whole story is retold in this prayer. What is interesting about retelling the story of God’s grace, the Exodus, bringing them into the land, and the story of the exile is that it brings them and us to a point of conviction. They realize that have not been acting or living as the people of God. They cry out, “Lord, have mercy. Forgive us.” It is very important for us to understand this in terms of the identity of the returnees, of the reestablishing and reshaping of the identity of the people of God.

Let us talk about the unusual story of Esther. The canonical question is an important one for Esther. There are several things about it that make this a question. It does not mention God by name, nor Abraham, Moses, or David. It is the only Old Testament book not represented in the Dead Sea scrolls. It is not quoted in the New Testament. It is included in the Hebrew canon, and that is how it came to be part of the canon of the whole Bible. It is probably included because it explains the origins of the Feast of Purim. Pur is the Hebrew word for lot, and the casting of the lots is the Purim. We know the importance of that for the story of Esther and the irony of that. It explains a very important feast of celebration for the Jewish people in terms of God’s sovereign protection of His people in Persia when they were to be exterminated by order of a high official of the Persian court. We see God’s direction and superintending of history even through foreign rulers. This is a consistent post-exilic theme. It is interesting that you have hints like Mordecai just happened to overhear the plot and Xerxes happened not to sleep but to have his records read. These are details given in the way the story is told. Even the way that Mordecai confronts and challenges Esther is interesting, “If you remain silent at this time, relief
and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.” He says this because God is faithful and has promised to be with His people. “You and your father’s family will perish, and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this.” There is a notion of the significance of this time, a sense of destiny and of God’s sovereign involvement in history. It is very evident in the book of Esther even though God is not mentioned by name.

The purpose of Esther is to reaffirm Jewish identity in the post-exilic period by establishing the Feast of Purim as a memorial of God’s deliverance of His people even while they were exiled in Persia. The importance of meals is not to be missed in the telling of the story. Just like we drew attention in my discussion of the book of Ruth to the narrative structure of the book, these feasts facilitate the narrative structure of the book of Esther. First you have the feast with Vashti, and then you have the feasts that Esther plans at the end. It is through these important feasts that the story is exercised. Queen Vashti’s downfall brings about Esther’s rise and the search for others to be a part of Xerxes’ harem. Mordecai spoils this conspiracy. We do not know how important that is at the beginning, but it becomes very important later. Then we have Xerxes’ first decree promoting Haman, and this spells trouble for the Jews because of his disdain for Mordecai. Then we have the turning point of the story where Esther dares an uninvited appearance before Xerxes, exposing Haman’s plot and Mordecai’s unrecompensed intervention as well as her identity as a Jewess. Then we have Xerxes’ second decree, so you can see the parallelism in the telling of the story. Mordecai’s reward allows the Jews to defend themselves on their day of doom. Then Esther, Mordecai, and the Persian court establish the Feast of Purim by Persian decree, displaying God’s faithfulness to the exiles.

To put all of this in perspective, we had a similar timeline that we have looked at in terms of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther. In 538 BC was the Cyrus edict and Zerubbabel’s return. Darius reigned until 486 BC, and the completion of the wall happened during his reign. It was Darius who brought about the restarting of the temple program. Then we have Xerxes and Esther’s intervention. Artaxerxes and Ezra’s return was around 458 BC. We have about 30 years before Ezra’s return, and Nehemiah’s journey was about 12 years after Ezra. Another thing about Esther that is important in terms of its canonicity and authenticity is the influence of Persian literature on the telling of Esther’s story. In 330 BC there was a massive seat change. Alexander the Great swept through, and he began his program of Hellenization and the influence of Greek language and culture. It marked a really important seat change in the history of God’s people. What is interesting is that there is more clearly Persian influence on terms in the story of Esther, which clearly came before Alexander’s time.

Turn to Esther 9 and the celebration of Purim. Notice the little summary that summarizes the whole story, and we will leave it at that. Verse 23 says,

The Jews agreed to continue the celebration they had begun, doing what Mordecai had written to them, for Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, had cast the Pur (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. But when the plot came to the king’s attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. Therefore these days were called Purim for the word Pur. Because of everything written in this letter and because of what they had seen and what had happened to them, the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who joined them should without fail observe these two days every year in the way prescribed at the time appointed.

This is a nice summary of the whole story. The only part about it that is not helpful is that the main
character is left out of the summary. Esther’s courageous role in the story is key.  

Now we have finished the historical books, and we need to begin to look at the writings and the Psalms and wisdom literature. Let us talk about the Psalms. We have discussed the importance of reestablishing the temple and temple worship. The Psalms are perhaps best understood as the hymnbook of the second temple. The title comes from the Greek word from the Septuagint, psalmas. There are New Testament references to this, for example in the passage in Ephesians 4 it mentions “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” It is interesting that the word itself means to sing or pluck an instrument. This presents interesting aspects to the discussion with our covenantal brothers and sisters perhaps. That is the origin of the word. Seventy-three psalms are attributed to king David, whose musical ability in 1 Samuel 16 and provision for music in the temple worship in 1 Chronicles 15 and 16 positioned him as the chief author of the psalms. He wrote most of the psalms, or more than anyone else. Asaph, who was appointed by David as the chief musician, according to 1 Chronicles 15, wrote 12 psalms. The sons of Korah are not to be confused with the Korah of Numbers. They are those who are the guild of temple singers listed in 2 Chronicles 20. Other authors include Moses (Psalm 90), Solomon (Psalm 72), and Ethan the Ezrahite. Forty-nine psalms are anonymous.  

John Calvin has very helpfully, I think, described the Psalms as a reflection or expression in worship of all parts of the soul. I think that is extremely liberating for us. God does not want us to pretend that everything is all right. He wants us to scream and shout when it is with high-sounding cymbals. That might be a little bit uncomfortable for us as Presbyterians. We are even to dance, as it says in the Psalms. I am sure you will have some discussion about that. I know when my Ghanaian brothers and sisters get up and start dancing it makes some of us nervous even though they are Presbyterians. Notice the honesty of the psalms of lament. Notice the expression of deep sadness and sorrow and even anger at God. It is an expression of wisdom of a wise person that he or she would bring their sorrows to God in worship. We can bring our questions to God in worship. These are not psalms to Baal, any other god, money, sex, power, ambition, or distraction. This is an arresting of the self and a bringing of the self to attention before God with our sorrows, sadness, anger, questions, and fear of our enemies. We can cry out also in jubilation and praise for the provision of the Creator Redeemer, Deliverer God. A reflection of all parts of the soul makes the Psalms something that can help us in our own worship and help us in our pastoral care of God’s people.  

The titles are usually the first verse of the Hebrew and Septuagint text. They are either part of inspired text or they are very early. Habakkuk 3:1 is an example of this, which we will look at later. There is a psalm of lament there, and we have instructions at the beginning that are part of the text. The Hebrew and Greek Bibles treat them as part of the text even in the numbering of the verses, which causes us some consternation as we try to figure out what the Septuagint says in relation to the English and the Hebrew. There are many different purposes for these titles. We have already talked about authorship as one of their purposes. We also have some historical notes in some of them. If you look at Psalm 3, for example, you have “a psalm of David when he fled from his son Absalom.” We have other little notations that help us historically. There are also musical notations and liturgical notes identifying songs of ascent or songs for the Sabbath day. There is worship instruction, musical notion, historical notes, and references to authorship.  

The Psalms cover a very long period of time, from the time of the Exodus up to post-exilic times. You have a psalm of Moses in Psalm 90, but Psalm 126 is the psalm that the conquering foes want the people to sing. It covers the entire history of Israel. “When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy, and it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things.’ And we were filled with joy.” The return back
to the land is mentioned in the Psalms. During the exile they could not sing songs of joy, but they would sing songs against their enemy. The entire spectrum of emotions and of the history of the people of God is reflected in the Psalms.

The Psalms are arranged quite intentionally into five books. If we were to do an outline for the Psalms we would say book one is Psalms 1 through 41. Let me show you what I mean as we look at this. There are three things to note. Psalms 1 and 2 serve as a very appropriate preparation for entering the temple to worship. You have the wisdom psalm in Psalm 1, and in Psalm 2 you have the coronation of the Lord’s anointed One and the enemies raging against Him. Nevertheless the Lord’s anointed One is coroneted. At the end of this collection you have all of creation singing hallelujahs. The beginning and the end are important to note. Notice at the end of each one of these books we have a similar doxology. Look at Psalm 41, which is the end of the first book. Some of your English Bibles will have over the heading of Psalm 42, “Book Two, Psalms 42 through 72.” Notice the way that book one ends in Psalm 41:13, “Praise be to Yahweh the God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.” Notice also the end of book two in Psalm 72:19, “Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory! Amen and Amen. This concludes the prayers of David, son of Jesse.” Then we have Psalm 89:52, which says, “Praise be to Yahweh forever. Amen and amen.” Psalm 106:48 says, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the Lord!” Psalm 150 begins and ends the same way, just as each one of these do in this collection here, starting with Psalm 146. “Hallelujah” is the beginning and end in Hebrew. Psalm 150:6 says, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!” The glory of the Lord, the praise of the Lord’s people, and the ascent of God’s people with “Amen and amen” is the notion that ends each one of these books. They are arranged for worship for the hymnal of Israel’s second temple.

Within the books are many collections, sometimes bound together by authorship. We saw this with the prayers of David. Then we also see in Psalms 73 through 83 the sons of Asaph. There is certainly a collection for the songs of ascent in Psalms 120 through 134. The songs of ascent are those psalms that were used as God’s people traveled to Jerusalem for the three festivals that were required by the law. This included Passover, Pentecost (or first fruits), and tabernacles. Just think for a moment about leaving everything on your farm to travel to Jerusalem to worship. It was a pretty risky business in those times and a tremendous act of faith. Notice also that we have a mini collection in Psalms 96 through 100 where we have a common theme, which is “the Lord reigns.” He reigns over all the earth and all the nations. Psalm 97:1 says, “The Lord reigns; let the earth be glad and let the distant shores rejoice!” Psalm 99:1 says, “The Lord reigns; let the earth be glad and let the distant shores rejoice!” Psalm 100:1 says, “Shout for joy to Yahweh all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness!” The reign of the Lord over all things is the theme of Psalms 96 through 100.

There are at least five different types of psalms. Different people divide them up in different ways. There are thanksgiving psalms, psalms of repentance, and royal psalms. Messianic psalms are a subset of royal psalms. There are also imprecatory psalms against enemies, where you call God to enact justice or judgment against your enemies. Finally, there are wisdom psalms that contrast the life of the righteous and of the wicked or the life of the wise and of the fool just like Proverbs does. I want to draw your attention to the fact that all of these psalms can in many ways be summarized in two primary types of psalms: psalms of praise and psalms of lament. Thanksgiving psalms are a particular type of praise sung when God has answered a lament. Many of the psalms of lament, for example, end with a vow of praise. That is part of how you lament. At the end you say to God, “When you answer this prayer, Lord, we will come back to the temple and tell everyone about Your goodness.” If you make a promise like that to God, you sure better do it, and that is what a psalm of thanksgiving is. It is when you come back and thank God and pay your vow of praise. Penitential psalms are psalms of repentance, and they are
expressions of lament. Royal psalms and messianic psalms are psalms of praise to God for His gift of the king and particularly His promise to the house of David. Imprecatory psalms are types of lament. I teach a class on Job in which I require my students to write psalms and prayers of lament. Some begin to figure out ways under the guidance of the psalms of how we can pray against those who prey on others. Whether we are involved in praying against indentured servitude, child labor issues, or sex trafficking, we can call on God to disrupt those networks and bring down those power structures of injustice. Those are the kinds of things that imprecatory psalms are for. They ask a just God to act on behalf of the weak and oppressed. We have various examples of these psalms.

Let me end this lesson by drawing our attention to a psalm of lament. There are three different examples to give, but notice the elements of a psalm of lament. Addressing God is a very important aspect of psalms of lament. At the beginning of the book Job curses the day he was born, and he almost laments in Job 10. He talks about his troubles, but there is one problem with that. He does not talk to God explicitly. He keeps making a distant reference to God, but it is not clear. It is really important to address God, and it is not just a formality. We talk to God, and what is really interesting about the Psalms is something that convicts me to no end. The psalmists are not stuck with one reference to God. I get stuck in my prayers sometimes and just call God “Father.” Father is a good way to address God, but there are so many metaphors and names in the Bible for God. If we pay attention, the psalmists are very strategic in the way in which they select the metaphors with which they refer to God. The psalm that says, “God, my rock and my refuge,” tells us that this prayer is going to be about protection against enemies. “God, my light and my guide” is a psalm about the need for wisdom and guidance. If we are careful in the way we look at the way that God is addressed, we begin to see that this is very intentional. The metaphors and names connect with the requests and the praises. There is a connection. It is very helpful in terms of teaching us the doctrine of God, who God is, and what God has done.