**Using the Psalms in Ministry.**

**David J Cohen**

Opening our Bibles to the centre we discover not only the book of Psalms but also a way of imaging the world through prayer. In fact, the Psalter became the prayer book of the returning exiles who built the Second Temple and the tradition carried through into the early church and beyond. The historical use of psalms as prayer affords a precedent. It reminds us that the Psalter has long offered guidance for people of faith who wish to pray. For those of us in various forms of ministry, the psalms offer an invaluable resource as we encourage people to pray in the face of all that life can present; the best and the worst.

While there are various types of psalms present in the Psalter, three more prevalent forms offer a framework of prayer for the life of faith. Taken together, lament, thanksgiving and praise psalms constitute the majority of psalms found in our Bibles. Collectively they reflect three important aspects of prayer and a particular approach to life. This approach offers healthy, balanced modes of emotional expression which provide validation, bring perspective and create pathways for growth.

Lament psalms are sometimes the forgotten children in the Psalter. These are the psalms where the psalmist complains, sometimes rails against God and dramatically requests God to intervene in their situation. They express a desire for relief from distress and suffering. Perhaps surprisingly, in the midst of lamenting there is some sense of hope. However, any hope does not preclude the psalmist from expressing their deep angst and despair evoked by their experience. For those of us in ministry, these psalms remind us that there is an important pathway of appeal to God in prayer. We would do well to encourage those who are suffering to express their distress to God in prayer as a sign of their trust in God.

The Psalter also contains many thanksgiving psalms. Unlike the lamenting psalmist, who is in the midst of distress, the thanksgiving psalmist reflects on distress and deliverance from distress which has come from God. These psalms remind us of the importance of thanksgiving or gratitude. However, this gratitude, for the psalmist, is not directionless. It is thankfulness offered to God as a recognition that God has been intimately involved in their situation. Often God’s involvement has been in relieving their distress and enabling the psalmist to navigate through a difficult circumstance. Thanksgiving psalms offer a language of gratitude for people of faith. They also remind us that ultimately we believe that ‘every good and perfect gift comes from above.’ As we minister to those around us it is important to remind people of the importance of gratitude and the goodness of God, even through difficult times.

The final major type of psalm we encounter is that of praise. Giving praise to God perhaps comes more naturally for some than others but we all need a language of praise offered to God. Praise psalms offer us that language. It’s important to be aware that praise of God in all its myriad forms, whether using the words of these psalms or in other ways, is not to be offered because God somehow needs our praise to feel good! For humans to praise God means that we are doing what we were created to do. Praise reminds us of the magnitude of our God alongside our own limitations and finitude. In a word, perspective.

Each type of psalm offers a different pathway in prayer to God. Taken together they provide a balanced, perspective forming view of the God we worship, who we were created to be as human beings and the nature of our relationship with God. These psalms embrace authenticity, honesty, gratitude and praise as worthy expressions in the life of faith. As we minister to others, these psalms remind us of our own need to lament, give thanks and praise. They are also provide something tangible that we can offer to support and encourage those wishing to develop a broader and deeper life of prayer.

**About the author**

Rev Dr David J Cohen is the Head of Biblical Studies and lecturer in Hebrew Bible and Language at Vose Seminary – Perth, Western Australia. He has an ongoing interest in the Psalms used for prayer and worship.