

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Ten

PSALMS 45 AND 102

The Son's Eternal Throne

It is a wedding day. A poet in the royal household has been given the assignment of a lifetime and he can hardly hold still: "My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe." There is a bridegroom in robes that smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia. There is a bride in gold, being led in with her companions. Somewhere in Jerusalem, a long time ago, two people got married, and a man wrote them a song. Then, roughly a thousand years later, a Christian writer picked up that song, turned to one line in the middle of it, and read it out loud as the words of God the Father spoken to Jesus of Nazareth.

This lesson puts two very different psalms side by side, because Hebrews 1 puts them side by side. Psalm 45 is a wedding song for a king, and its sixth verse calls the bridegroom "God" and gives him a throne that lasts forever. Psalm 102 is the prayer of a man so sick and so alone that he compares himself to a bird sitting by itself on a rooftop, and its closing verses turn to praise the LORD as the Creator who will still be exactly Himself when the sky wears out like an old coat. Hebrews takes the first and says, "But of the Son he says." Then it takes the second and says, "And." This is the lesson about who Jesus is, and it should be handled slowly and with a good deal of reverence.

Read Psalm 45 and Psalm 102 all the way through this week, more than once, before you read anything else. Then read Hebrews 1 with a pencil in your hand and mark every quotation, and if you can, look up where each one comes from. Then read John 1:1 to 18, Colossians 1:15 to 20, and Hebrews 13:8. Come to class having read both psalms in full, and carry this question with you: what does it do to the way I live if the man who died outside Jerusalem is the one who laid the foundation of the earth?

First impressions

The two psalms could not look less alike, and their headings tell you why. Psalm 45 reads, "To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah; a love song." "Lilies" was almost certainly a tune name. The Sons of Korah were a family of Levites who served as singers in the temple, and eleven psalms carry their name. The Hebrew phrase behind "a love song" is unusual and could be rendered "a song of loves," which is exactly what you would expect on a wedding program. Psalm 102 has a heading unlike any other in the Psalter, because it names no author at all. It names a condition: "A Prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the LORD." That heading is a gift. It means the psalm belongs to anybody who is in that shape, and always has.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 45 and Psalm 102 straight through, one after the other. Write one sentence describing the mood of each. What do they have in common, if anything?
 - b. What surprises you most about either psalm, and about the idea that Hebrews would quote them both about Jesus?

The chain of seven quotations (Hebrews 1:1–14)

Hebrews opens without a greeting, which almost no other letter in the New Testament does, and goes straight into the highest paragraph in the book. God used to speak by the prophets. Now He has spoken by a Son, "whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world," who is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature," who "upholds the universe by the word of his power," and who, "after making purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Then the writer says the Son has become "as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs," and he sets out to prove it. He does not argue. He quotes. Seven times in nine verses he opens the Old Testament and lets it talk, and the whole chain is built on a single contrast: of the angels God says one kind of thing, and to the Son He says another kind of thing altogether. Angels are made. Angels are servants. Angels are sent. The Son is addressed as God, seated on an everlasting throne, and credited with the creation of heaven and earth.

2.
 - a. Read Hebrews 1:1 to 4. List everything this paragraph says about the Son. How many separate claims can you find?
 - b. According to 1:2 and 1:3, what part did the Son have in creation, and what is He doing with the universe right now?
3.
 - a. Read Hebrews 1:5 to 13 and find all seven Old Testament quotations. Write down where each one comes from, using the margin references in your Bible if you have them. Which two are about angels, and which five are about the Son?
 - b. Read Hebrews 1:7 and 1:14 together. What does the writer say angels are and what are they for? Now put that beside 1:8. What is the difference he is driving at?

For Further Study: Hebrews never makes a doctrinal point without pressing it on the reader. Read Hebrews 2:1 to 4, which is the "therefore" attached to the chain of quotations, and notice that the whole argument about the Son's superiority exists in order to say, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." Notice also what 2:3 to 4 says about how that message was confirmed: it was declared by the Lord, attested by those who heard Him, and witnessed to by God with signs and wonders and miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Compare Mark 16:20 and 1 Corinthians 13:8 to 10. What was the purpose of the miraculous, and what do we have now that the first hearers were still receiving?

A wedding song for a king (45:1-9)

Be honest about what Psalm 45 is, because the lesson is worth nothing if we pretend. It is a wedding song. Somebody in Israel got married, and the man was a king, and this was sung at the ceremony. The first nine verses are addressed to the bridegroom. He is handsome and gracious in speech. He is told to strap on his sword and ride out for the cause of "truth and meekness and righteousness," which is a striking list of things to go to war for. His robes are perfumed. He is standing in an ivory palace with a queen at his right hand. All of that fits a real day in a real Jerusalem. And then, in the middle of it, verse 6 says something that does not fit any wedding that ever took place in that city: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness." Every king who heard that song sung over him was buried within a few decades. Not one of their thrones lasted. The song is saying more than the occasion could hold, which is exactly what a psalm does when God intends it to reach further than the poet could see.

4.
 - a. Read 45:1 to 5. Who is the singer addressing, and how does he describe his own excitement? What is the king told to ride out for in verse 4?
 - b. What would a wedding guest in Jerusalem have understood this song to be about on the day it was first sung?
5.
 - a. Read 45:6 to 7 slowly, several times. What is said about the throne? What is said about the scepter? What has the king loved, and what has he hated?
 - b. Verse 7 says, "Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." If verse 6 addresses the king as "God," what is verse 7 saying about the relationship between the one addressed and God? Do not try to resolve it yet; just write down what the text says.

- c. The word "anointed" is the verb behind the title "Messiah" in Hebrew and "Christ" in Greek, and both words simply mean "Anointed One." How does that change the way verse 7 sounds?

Study Skill, Comparing Translations on a Difficult Line: Psalm 45:6 is one of the places where honest translators have landed differently, and it is a good place to learn what to do about that. The Hebrew of the first phrase is very compact, three words, and it can be read as a direct address, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever," or as a statement about the throne rather than the man, along the lines of "your throne is God's throne forever" or "your divine throne endures forever." Open your own Bible to Psalm 45:6 right now and read the footnote. Then look at a second translation if you have one. Three habits are worth building. First, read the footnotes; they are not there to unsettle you but to tell you the truth about the text. Second, ask whether any doctrine actually stands or falls on the difference, since usually it does not. Third, and most important here, ask whether the New Testament itself has already settled the question. In this case it has. The Greek Old Testament read the line as a direct address, and Hebrews 1:8 quotes it that way and says it is spoken to the Son.

6. a. Read 45:8 to 9 and then 45:16 to 17. What kind of setting do verses 8 and 9 describe? What is promised to the king in verses 16 and 17 about his sons and about his name?
- b. Verse 17 says nations will praise this king "forever and ever." Name every line in this psalm so far that could not honestly be said of any man buried in Jerusalem.

The bride and the sons (45:10–17)

In verse 10 the song turns and speaks to the bride. She is told to forget her people and her father's house, which sounds harsh until you remember that she is almost certainly a foreign princess and that leaving one household for another is what a wedding is. She is led in to the king in embroidered robes with her companions behind her, "with joy and gladness." Then the song turns back to the king and promises him sons who will be princes in all the earth and a name remembered in every generation. Now, a caution that matters. The New Testament never quotes verses 10 to 17 and applies them to the church, and we should not claim more for a text than Scripture claims. But the New Testament does teach, on its own authority and in several places, that the church is the bride of Christ, presented to Him in splendor, and that He loved her and gave Himself up for her. Once Hebrews has told us who the King in verse 6 is, we cannot help reading the rest of the wedding song with different eyes, and there is no harm in that as long as we know the difference between what Scripture says and what we are noticing.

7.
 - a. Read 45:10 to 15. What is asked of the bride, and what is she given? What is the mood of these verses?
 - b. Now read Ephesians 5:25 to 32, 2 Corinthians 11:2, and Revelation 19:6 to 9. Who is the bride in the New Testament, and what did the Bridegroom do for her?

For Further Study: Follow the wedding all the way to the end of the Bible. Read Isaiah 54:5 and Hosea 2:19 to 20, where the LORD is the husband of His people; then Matthew 9:15 and 25:1 to 13, where Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom; then Ephesians 5:25 to 27, where He gives Himself up for His bride to present her to Himself in splendor; then Revelation 19:6 to 9 and 21:2 and 21:9 to 10, where the marriage supper of the Lamb finally comes and the bride turns out to be a city full of people. Ask two questions of the chain. Who does the New Testament say the bride is? And what did the Bridegroom have to do before there could be a wedding at all?

A prayer of one afflicted (102:1-11)

Turn the page and the music stops. Psalm 102 is one of the loneliest chapters in the Bible. The man's days are going up like smoke. His bones burn. He has stopped eating. He groans until he is nothing but skin over bone. He compares himself to a desert owl among ruins and to a lonely sparrow on a housetop, which is one of the most exact pictures of isolation in Scripture: not a bird in a cage, but a bird by itself on a roof, in the middle of a city full of people. He is mocked all day. He mixes tears into his drink and eats ashes. And he does not blame his enemies for it. In verse 10 he says it is "because of your indignation and anger; for you have taken me up and thrown me down." He brings the whole thing to God, including the part he thinks God did.

8.
 - a. Read 102:1 to 11 and list the images the man uses to describe himself. Which one hits you hardest, and why?
 - b. In verse 10, who does he say has done this to him? What does it tell you that he prays this to God rather than about God?

For Thought and Discussion: The heading of Psalm 102 names no author, only a condition: one afflicted, faint, pouring out his complaint before the LORD. God put an anonymous sick man's prayer in the hymnbook of His people and then, a thousand years later, quoted its final verses to His Son. Who in your congregation is the lonely sparrow on the housetop right

now? What would it mean to them to know that their prayer is the kind of prayer God preserves?

But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever (102:12–22)

Verse 12 is the turn, and it turns on two words: "But you." Everything the man has said about himself has been about time running out. Now he says, "But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever; you are remembered throughout all generations." And having said it, he stops talking about himself for eleven verses. He talks about Zion instead, about God arising to have pity on her, about servants who love her rubble, about nations and kings coming to fear the name of the LORD. Verse 17 is one of the quiet glories of the Psalter: "he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer." Then verses 18 to 22 look down the centuries at people who do not exist yet. "Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD." God looked down from heaven to hear the groans of the prisoners and to set free those doomed to die, so that His name would be declared in Zion when peoples and kingdoms gather to worship Him. A dying man in a ruined city wrote that. He is describing you.

9. a. Read 102:12 to 22. What changes at verse 12, and what does the man stop talking about?

- b. Read 102:18 to 22 again. Who is the "people yet to be created," and what does God do in verses 19 and 20? Compare 1 Peter 2:9 to 10 from last week.

You remain (102:23–28)

The man comes back to himself in verse 23. His strength is broken in midcourse; his days are cut short. He asks not to be taken away in the middle of his life, and the reason he gives is God's endless years. And then come the four verses that Hebrews will quote. "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end." Sit with that picture. The mountains and the oceans and the stars are a coat God is wearing, and one day He will take it off and hang up another one, and He will not have aged a day. The psalm ends by handing that permanence to ordinary people: "The children of your servants shall dwell secure; their offspring shall be established before you." The man's own years are short. The years of the God he prays to are not, and that is why his children will be safe.

10. a. Read 102:23 to 28. What does the man ask for, and what reason does he give?

- b. Put verse 26 and verse 27 in your own words. What happens to creation, and what happens to the Creator? Compare Matthew 24:35 and 2 Peter 3:10 to 13.

Hebrews puts the psalms into the Father's mouth

Now watch what Hebrews does. "But of the Son he says, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." The wedding song is not being applied to Jesus by way of illustration. The writer says God said it, and said it to the Son. Then, without pausing, he adds Psalm 102: "And, You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end." Read that again and let the size of it register. Words that Israel sang to the LORD, the Creator of heaven and earth, are here addressed to Jesus of Nazareth, and the point being made is that He is greater than the angels. Hebrews has already said the same thing in its own words at 1:2, that God made the world through Him, and Paul and John both say it too (John 1:1 to 3; Colossians 1:16 to 17; 1 Corinthians 8:6).

Two things must be held together here, and Hebrews holds them in a single sentence. Verse 8 addresses the Son as God. Verse 9 says "God, your God, has anointed you." The Son is fully divine, and the Son is not the Father. Scripture is entirely comfortable saying both, and we should be too. What Scripture never does is speculate beyond that, and neither should we. The New Testament is not interested in giving us a diagram; it is interested in getting us on our knees. Thomas got there first and got there fastest, in five words, with his hands still shaking: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Study Skill, Reading the Greek Old Testament the Apostles Quoted: Sometimes a New Testament quotation does not match the Old Testament wording in your Bible, and there is a simple reason. Our Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew. The apostles were usually quoting a Greek translation of the Old Testament made a couple of centuries before Christ and used all over the Greek-speaking world, the same way a preacher today quotes the translation his audience carries. Hebrews 1:10 is a clear example. The Greek text of Psalm 102:25 begins by addressing God directly, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth," where the Hebrew line simply says, "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth." You saw the same thing in Lesson Five, where Hebrews 10:5 quotes Psalm 40:6 as "a body have you prepared for me" while the Hebrew reads "ears you have dug for me." Three things are worth settling in your mind. This does not mean our Bible is unreliable; it means we are watching an inspired writer use a translation his readers already had. It does mean you should check the Old Testament context before building an argument on the exact wording of a quotation. And it means that when a New Testament writer chooses a particular rendering, the choice itself is inspired and is usually the very thing he is making his point from.

11.
 - a. Read Hebrews 1:8 to 9. Who is speaking, and to whom? What is the Son called in verse 8?
 - b. Psalm 45:6 to 7 was written for a wedding in Jerusalem. Hebrews says it is spoken to the Son. Is this a case of direct prophecy, or of a psalm whose words about an anointed king are filled up completely in the true Anointed King? Give your reasons from the psalm itself.
12.
 - a. Read Hebrews 1:10 to 12 and then Psalm 102:25 to 27. In the psalm, who is being addressed? In Hebrews, who is being addressed?
 - b. What three things do these verses say about the Son that could not be said about any created being?
 - c. Read Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Which line of Psalm 102 is that sentence standing on? Compare Malachi 3:6.

What the Son is, and what that asks of us

Put the two psalms back together and see what the writer of Hebrews has done. From a wedding song he takes a throne that never ends and a scepter that is never crooked, and he says that is your King. From a sick man's prayer he takes the everlasting Creator who does not wear out, and he says that is your Savior. And the man who holds both of those descriptions is the one who, according to Hebrews 1:3, "made purification for sins" before He sat down. The hands that laid the foundation of the earth were nailed to a Roman cross. That is the Christian faith, and there is nothing else like it in any religion the world has produced.

So what does it ask of us? Three things at least. It asks worship, because a proper response to Hebrews 1 is not agreement but adoration. It asks attention, which is exactly the "therefore" of Hebrews 2:1, that we pay much closer attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift. And it asks a settled heart, because the One whose years have no end is the One holding you. Everything you are afraid of losing is part of a garment that is going to be folded up and put away. He is not.

13.
 - a. Read John 1:1 to 3 and 1:14, Colossians 1:15 to 17, and John 20:28. What does each passage say about who Jesus is? How do they line up with Hebrews 1:10 to 12?

- b. Hebrews 2:1 draws the conclusion from all of this: "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it." Why is drifting the danger the writer names, rather than rebelling? What does drifting look like in an ordinary Christian life?

Optional Application: Memorize Hebrews 1:10 to 12, or Psalm 102:25 to 27, or both. They are almost the same words. Then find one person this week who is in the condition described in the heading of Psalm 102, afflicted and faint, and go and sit with them. Take the psalm with you. Read verses 1 to 11 out loud first, so that they hear their own life read to them from the Bible, and only then read verses 25 to 27.

Your response

14. Where in your life are you holding on hardest to something that is part of the garment God is going to fold up? What would it look like this week to loosen your grip on it and tighten your grip on Him?
15. Psalm 102 says God "regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer." What have you been reluctant to bring to God because you assumed He was tired of hearing it? Write it down and pray it this week anyway.
16. Write one specific step you will take in light of this lesson, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Read Hebrews 1:1 to 4 aloud without comment, and then ask the class to name the single sentence in it that is hardest to take in. Do not discuss the answers yet; just collect three or four and write them where everyone can see them. You will come back to them at the end of the hour.

Discussion. The lesson turns on questions 3, 5, 11, and 12. Question 3, finding all seven quotations, is worth doing together out loud even if the class did not finish it at home, because everything else depends on seeing the shape of the argument. Question 11b is where the series' teaching on prophecy and type gets its hardest test, and it should not be skipped. Protect enough time at the end for question 12, which is the highest point in the lesson. Keep the tone reverent rather than triumphant; this is an hour for wonder, not for winning.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 102:25 to 27 aloud, and then Hebrews 1:10 to 12, and then Hebrews 13:8, and stop there without commentary. Sing something about the greatness of Christ before you pray. Then tell the class that next week they meet two more psalms of David, one about a man whose bones God would not let anyone break, and one about a friend who ate at his table and turned on him.