

# The Therapeutic Values of the Psalms

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## Abstract:

*Psalms have become the daily part of our lives. They have been elemental in advocating the spiritual, mental and physical health issues of the reader. The mind transformations and attitudinal changes are evident in the lives of individuals and the communities. It has greatly appealed to the human faculties. The genres of psalm such as praise, lament, imprecatory, and thanksgiving play a radical role in asserting the therapeutic values. Words and their sounds impart life to the hearer and reader. They sink deep down into the heart and fill our consciousness and stir up the passions and desires within us in a healthy manner. Psychologically, psalms create a positive impact and healing effect on the minds of the client. Usage of psalms have to be in line with the theological exegesis in order to avoid exegetical contradictions.*

**Key Words:** therapeutic, value, poetry therapy, prayer, afflictions, emotions, lament, imprecatory, God, blessedness, praise.

## Introduction:

The book of Psalms has been set out universally and in relation to the human-divine context. And has constituted individual, human, social, cultural, national and religious experience of the writer and the common reader as everyman. It touches the realms that are above, within and around. Psalms have become a great source of devotion that has invigorated the faculties of man i.e. spirit, soul and body. And its subjects reflect the individual and social spiritual conditions prevalent not only in that era but has transcended thousands of generations across the period of time.

The psalms are enriched with multiplied values like prayer, praise, devotion and worship of God, all round health and has been elemental in preserving the homeland cultures as well as the foreign.

The book of psalms is multi-dimensional and multifunctional in essence. Its framework has been crafted at the hands of the Almighty and its significance ranges from historical times through present to the future course of events. The pre-Christian and almost all religion attitude toward disease was that it was a punishment from God or some deity for a sin either of the sick person, his family, or the whole community. Jesus did not hold on to this view adamantly. He made it clear when inquired about the cause of the blindness of a man born blind, 'Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?' He replied, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him'. Moral and ethical considerations are not always the norm and standpoint from which a disease condition is judged, rather the focus is directed toward the power of God which takes effect in healing those who have faith and confidence in His word.

## Material and Methods:

With the development of modern disciplines such as science, psychology and linguistics and many other critical theories of criticism, a literary work has been viewed through prism of critical theories and various critical activities are engaged in to investigate afresh with different parameters and tools of criticism. Their outcome and the results are radical transformations in societies and generation of newer and fresh values for human existence and varied literary perspectives.

Amongst many critical approaches and interpretive modes of criticism one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century development was **poetry therapy, a form of expressive arts therapy**, involves the therapeutic use of poems, narratives, and other spoken or written media to promote well-being and healing. As part of therapy, some people may wish to explore feelings, emotions and memories buried in the subconscious and identify how they may relate to current life circumstances. Therapists may use existing literature which they believe offer therapeutic value as part of treatment or encourage those

in therapy to produce their own literary works to express deep-seated emotions. It is recommended that selected poems be concise, address universal emotions or experiences, offer some degree of hope, and contain plain language.

The book of psalms contains various genres of the psalms poem in the form of prayers, praise. And the poetry therapy is a valid therapeutic tool for analyzing changing aspects of psalms genre for overall health of the client. A psychological justification for negative emotions and theological views are juxtaposed and engaged to treat the problems. The book of psalms can be approached with historical sense of psalms, allegorical sense that is centered on Christ, and the anagogical sense of scripture that teaches the client the spiritual value of psalms. However, faith and earnest expectation is essential condition for receiving healing in its entirety. Psalms give nourishment to the spirit, soul and body richly and examines their states.

The Psalms can be read by the client by viewing his plight as the plight of the psalmist. The position of the psalmist as his own, and the discourse can serve as an alternative.

**Findings and Results:** In psalms we observe that the mind of the psalmist goes through painful situations and experiences a psychological disorder. He is stuck and ensnared by complex spiritual enigmas. But the traumatic and stressful condition is resolved through outpouring of the soul in prayer. Therapists suggest the use of scriptures-psalms for mental and spiritual health issues. However, a significant disparity is noted between imprecatory Psalms and command of Christ to love and forgive. Yet for the psychological and physiological concerns angry emotional outbreak in imprecatory psalms seems to be fully justified by psychological and poetry diagnosis therapy.

The psalms have been noted to have a powerful therapeutic effect in giving voice to the difficult emotional and psychological states. Such as individual pain, sorrows, grief, afflictions, struggle, physical illness, anger, frustrations, envy, hatred, hopelessness, feelings of loneliness, distress, despair, depression, fear of enemies, imminent dangers of death, oppression by occult and demonic powers. On the whole, the answers provided by medical and natural sciences may not always work, in that case, Psalms can serve as one of the vital and befitting solution. And the therapy facilitated by Psalms creates a healthy interaction between common human being and God who delivers and heals them and the people in general.

The Psalms is a poetry which intensifies and heightens emotions and feelings of a person at most sensitive situations. Out of these situations emotional outbreak can be both positive and negative, melancholic and joyous. There are different genres of psalms which embody and express such multifarious emotional experiences individually and culturally. In this context, the form of lament and imprecatory psalms express the most intense and predominant emotions that speak of distress, anger, loneliness and vengeance, etc. In contrast, the psalms of praise are arrayed with the most sublime beauty, transcendent joy from God and rapturous visions of His heavens. In the psalms a man who prays and God who listens and answers the prayer, restores a person to his normal condition. Prayer allows a person to communicate with his Creator God the most intimate and secret feelings as he pours out his heart believing that in God he will find the ultimate solace.

### Interpretation and Discussion:

#### On depression, fear and trouble:

Psalm 91 has been selected to deal with **depression and fear**. It has proved to be a life changing experience. Verses 5-6 promises read thus that you shall not be afraid of the **terror** by **night** (v5), you shall not be afraid of the **arrow** that flieth by day (v5), you shall not be afraid of the **pestilence** that walks in **darkness** (v6), you shall not be afraid of that which **destroys** at noonday (v6).

According to Theresa Tisdale psalm 91 has been very effective in overcoming ones depressed and fearful states both psychologically and physically.<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 3:1-3 gives vent to the feelings of **loneliness, and distress**. The Psalm speaks: "O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying to me 'There is no help for you in God'. But you, O Lord are a shield around me, my glory and the one who lifts up my head".

Psalm 46:1-2 GOD is our refuge and strength, a very present help in **trouble**. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Further, more statements about **distress** in psalm 119 noted are, My soul is broken (v20) I am in reproach and contempt (v 22) my soul cleaves to the dust (v25) my soul melts because of heaviness (v28) I fear reproach (v39) I have been in derision (v51) I live in horror (v53) I suffered affliction because of my backsliding (v67) My soul faints (v 81) I am

persecuted wrongfully (v86) I am almost consumed (v87) the wicked seek to destroy me (v95) I am very much afflicted (v107) My flesh trembles (v120) I shed rivers of tears (v136) I have trouble and anguish (v143) I was grieved (v158).

The above verses reveal the afflictions and the sufferings of the psalmist. The intensity of the hurt emotions can be measured on the scale of pain. The psalmist finds voice to his innermost feelings of suppression through the psalms. A person who finds himself in such a similar state can engage specific psalms which can serve him as a model to appropriate his context to facilitate the personal meaning. In this way, the client is encouraged to apply the psalms to tackle the circumstances of his life.

In analyzing the therapeutic implications of lament psalms allegorical meaning should be understood and correlated profoundly in order to make a proper sense. As it can be seen with Psalm 22 'I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels (v14) My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.(v15) For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet'.(v16)

Among the above mentioned verses (v15, 16) do not make a literal sense and they do not show a commonplace interpretation. They express a specific predetermined context. Their in-depth understanding figures Christ who is seen as the one crucified on the cross and His suffering. The verses are context-specific, person-specific, and event-specific, written to be applied specifically.

In such a situation the therapeutic power is determined by allegorical sense. And the therapist may help the client correlate suffering of Christ and also that of Apostle Paul as he signified in Colossians 1:24 'Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church' (v24). In this way the client comes to view and reflect his own situation.

### **On justice and vengeance:**

Psalm 94:1-2 O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth: render a reward to the proud.

Psalm 137:8 'O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us'.

The imprecatory psalms reveal a great deal about the punishment with vengeance of the wicked and the unbelieving. The righteous cry out strongly for the execution of the vengeance on their enemies. One may ask, how can the pronouncements of the curses and the atrocities in the psalms be held in conformity with God's virtue of love? If God is a God of justice and truth, He will have to act responsibly and be committed to the promises and covenants that He has made with His people. Schaefer in his book *Berit Olam, Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* says that "When one submits to God by praying a curse he or she is no longer free to take revenge, because vengeance is transferred from the heart of speaker to God who plays an interested role in the believers life"(xi). No person, nor a prayer can overrule the right, power and authority of God in meting out justice than what is warrant in the will and the Word of God might permit. One has to subject voluntarily to the final decision that is vested in the hands of God. The client should not think that his case is binding upon God, rather trust in His faithfulness and leave room for final resolution.

### **On praises to God:**

Psalms include 105, 111, 113, 117, 135, 136, 146, and 147.

105:2 Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; talk of all His wondrous works!

111:1 Praise the Lord! I will praise the LORD with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright and in the congregation. V3 His work is honorable and glorious, and His righteousness endures forever.

113:3 From the rising of the sun to its going down the LORD'S name is to be praised.

135:3 Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant.

146:2 While I live I will praise the LORD; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

147:7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; sing praises on the harp to our God,

Man on earth lives his life on shifting modes, sometimes he may seem to be joyful and other times may look tensed and sorrowful. A man who wants to live a life of joy, peace, and overall well- being it is necessary to ascribe praises to God. Praises reflect the whole landscape of life of its presenter realistically and describes the character, nature, and specific acts of God in an individual and community's life truthfully and faithfully. Because His divine providence of grace and mercy has enabled this life; a life of praise and prayer has been always elemental in curbing curses and increasing blessings on one's life in an empirical sense. Praise is heart's spiritual acknowledgement receipt expressed toward God for fulfilling every need and vow of the petitioner. Praises allow God to indwell people's hearts and make a room to share the riches of His glory with them. Wherever there is lack of praise there is defeat, weakening, and no

growth, hence, no place for God but wherever people excel in extolling praises to God continually, there is empowerment and victory over the forces that sicken and fight against them. It is rightly observed that 'Plea and praise mean living. The dead do neither, and consequently the one who does not plea and praise is like them' (Westermann 188).

Singing of God's never ending praises for His excellence, greatness and goodness is the major task of every chosen generation in every age and in the eternal age. It creates a healthy and positive impact on the relationship between God and men. So it is commended that the Almighty be honored, worshipped, exalted and thanked with singing, dancing, and by making a joyful noise unto the Lord for the praise of His glory. Praises uttered through the Spirit pleases the heart of God and makes people merry. Thus, the therapeutic values are substantiated through the praise psalms when we find the psalmist explode with singing praises. The Spirit-filled praises relieves a heart of all its burdens, cares and bondages. And sets a man on high and happy mood.

**Conclusion:** The psalms contain many-sided therapeutic values which are elemental in personal and community's transformations. If the use of the psalms are advocated with proper exegesis they can prove to be a valuable mechanism and serve the purpose of the client. Psalms may said to have a cathartic effect in that it cleanses the heart and mind of the client. The client finds his way to expression of his repressed and negative emotions, feelings, depression, anger, fear, and vengeance, etc. through the psalms. Whenever a client confronts and finds himself in such situations and is affected by them; he can recourse to psalms relevant in those situations. There, by referring and relocating the psalms in the given context. He can give voice to his experiences and problems. Thus, a person might get relief and come to resolution of his emotional disorders and differing experiences. In this way the psalms have benefited the reader and come to establish its therapeutic use and practice.

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