Reflections on the Psalms
C S Lewis

OUTLINE – Lent 2012

2/29/2012
Timeline of Lewis’ life and works
pp 1-34
Judgments/Cursings
Learn (sung) Cry of the Poor (Judgment)

3/7/2012
Group discussion of prior week’s ‘sitting with Psalms’
pp 44-65
Fair Beauty/Sweeter
Learn (sung) Ps 19: 5 ff Sweeter than the Honey

3/14/2012
Group discussion of prior week’s ‘sitting with Psalms’
pp 76-99
Nature/Praising
Learn (sung) Ps 19:1-4 The Heavens Declare

3/21/2012
Group discussion of prior week’s ‘sitting with Psalms’
pp 109-120
Scripture/Intimacy (immanent/transcendent)
Learn (sung) Ps 73.25 Whom have I in Heaven but Thee

3/28/2012
Group discussion of prior week’s ‘sitting with Psalms’
pp 99-109; 120-139
Discuss "Second Meanings" - esp Psalms re: Holy Week
Learn (sung) Ps. 62 (chant)
Ellingboe's "My God" Ps 22
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A brief chronology

1898(b) – 1829   THE EARLY YEARS
• Abandons Christian faith
• Confirmed at St. Marks in Belfast
• Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford
• Converts from atheism to theism for intellectual reasons.

1930 – 1939   CONVERSION & INTELLECTUALISM
• Inklings (a small informal group including Lewis, Tolkien, Barfield, Williams...)
• Famous discussion with Tolkien about Christianity as the fulfillment of mythology.
• "Full Conversion" to Christianity (during a motorcycle ride with brother Warren).
• Tolkien’s Hobbit is published.
• England declares war.

1940—1949   BEGINNING OF PUBLISHED WORKS
• The Problem of Pain published by Centenary Press.
• The Screwtape Letters published.

1950—1965   MATURE CHRISTIANITY
• The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe (Narnia)
• Mere Christianity
• Completes last tutorial at Magdalen College, Oxford.
• Met Joy Davidman Gresham, an American writer of Jewish background, a former Communist, and a convert from atheism to Christianity
• Surprised by Joy
• Jack and Joy are married at the Oxford Registry Office (civil ceremony)
• Joy diagnosed with bone cancer – Christian wedding
• Reflections on the Psalms
• The Four Loves
• Joy dies.
• A Grief Observed under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk – often recommended to Lewis by his friends!
• Has a heart attack and dies at the Kilns, the same day JFK is assassinated.
• Letters to Malcolm
• The Discarded Image (Summarized in Part 3 of Narnia: "Christian allegory + Mythical gods = Deception."

CONTEXT
Reflections written at age 60, near end of his life (65)
After his marriage to Joy Gresham, with her cancer in remission and soon before her cancer returns
Based on Anglican Prayer Book (Coverdale, with some translations checked against Moffatt 1870-1944)
67:4 “Let all the people praise thee” To the chief musician on Neginoth (stringed instruments). A psalm or song.
O let the nations be glad and sing for joy: for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon the earth. Selah

96:12-13 A call to praise God
Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein: then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth; he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth.

35:12-14;23-24 a prayer of rescue from enemies
They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling (bereaving) of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily as one that mourneth for his mother....Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment, even unto my cause, my God and my Lord. Judge me, O Lord, my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me.

68:5 To the chief musician. A psalm or song of David.
A father of the fatherless and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.

72:2 The reign of the righteous king. A psalm for Solomon.
He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment

76:8-9 The victorious God To the chief musician on Neginoth (stringed instruments) A psalm of Asaph
Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, when God arose to judgment to save all the meek of the earth. Selah.

How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah. Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked.

10:2 a prayer for the overthrow of the wicked
The wicked in his pride doth persecute the poor: let them be taken in the devices that they have imagined.

50:6-21 / 143:2 God is the judge; a psalm of Asaph/ “teach me to do thy will”; a psalm of David
And enter knot into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

7:3-5, 8 a prayer for deliverance A Shiggaion (a lyrical poem composed under strong, mental emotion; impassioned) of David which he sang unto the Lord, concerning he words of Cush the Benjamite
O Lord my God, if I have done this; if there be iniquity n my hands; if I have rewarded evil unto him that was at peace with me; (yea, I have delivered him that without cause is mine enemy;) let the enemy persecute my soul, and take it: yea let him tread down my life upon the earth and lay mine honor in the dust. Selah....The Lord shall judge the people: judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness, and according to mine integrity that is in me.

9:8-12 Praise for God's justice. To the chief musician according to Muthlabben. A psalm of David.
And he shall judge the world in righteousness, he shall minister judgment to the people in uprightness. The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee. Sing praises to the Lord, which dwelleth in Zion: Declare among the people his doings. When he maketh inquisition for blood, he remembereth them: he forgetteth not the cry of the humble.

34:1-6 The Lord hears the righteous A psalm of David when he changed his behavior before Abimelech; who drove him away and he departed.
[The Lord hears the cry of the poor, blessed be the Lord]
109:5-13  A prayer for punishment of the wicked To the chief musician. A psalm of David
And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few and let another take his office. Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places. Let the extortioner catch all the he hath: and let the strangers spoil his labor. Let there be none to extend mercy unto him: neither let there be any to favor his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

137:9 The mourning of the exiles in Babylon
Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

69:23 A cry of distress. To the chief musician upon Shoshannim (a lily-shaped instrument). A psalm of David
Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let they wrathful anger take hold of them.

143:12 Teach me to do thy will A psalm of David.
And of thy mercy cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul: for I am thy servant.

139:19ff The everlasting presence and power of God To the chief musician. A psalm of David
Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O god: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men...Do I not hate them, O Lord that hate thee?...I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them as mine enemies. Search me O God and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

23:5The Lord is my shepherd. A psalm of David.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
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Judgment/Cursing - 2/29/12

Lord, open our lips,
And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

PERSPECTIVE

Example of Fellow-pupil vs. Master. “Fellow-pupil can help more because he knows less.”

Positioned as one amateur to another; sharing observations not ‘instructing’.

Strong belief that Psalms are poems intended to be sung, not doctrine or sermons.

- Read Psalms as poems with lyrics, licenses, hyperbole and emotion of lyric poetry.
- The “pattern of parallelism” survives in all translations (different from meter)
- Must be recognized to avoid over analysis for meaning in the second half of the verse
- The principle of art “the same in the other” (Dance steps – 3 left; 3 right; rhymes – first sound ‘other’ last sound ‘same’ ABAB)

EXAMPLES OF PARALLELISM

“He that dwells in heaven shall laugh them to scorn
The Lord shall have them in derision” (2:4)

“He shall make their righteousness as clear as the light;
And their just dealing as the noon-day” (37:6)

Jesus, deeply entrenched in his culture and teachings, “For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Mt. 7:2) and later, “Ask….seek….knock” (7:7)

“If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?” (Lk. 11:11)

APPROACH

“Principle of nursery gastronomy – polish off the nasty things first and leave the tidbits to the end."

Not ‘apologetics’ - “A man can’t be always defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it.”
JUDGMENT IN THE PSALMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHRISTIAN</th>
<th>JEWISH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of Judgment/Wrath</td>
<td>Day of Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pray to be delivered</td>
<td>Pray to be heard – Ask for it</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek mercy instead of justice (punishment)</td>
<td>Seek justice instead of injustice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard of purity – Divine (“Be holy as my Father”)</td>
<td>Standard of purity – human standard (as in civil cases)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Sheep &amp; Goats” parable</td>
<td>“Persistent widow” parable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cause for Fear</td>
<td>Cause for Rejoicing (67:4; 96:12-13)</td>
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<td>We are the criminal</td>
<td>We are the plaintiff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seek acquittal, pardon</td>
<td>Seek triumph (WITH damages!)</td>
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Psalms to be reviewed:

- 67:4
- 96:12-13
- 35:12-14,23-24
- 68:5
- 72:2
- 76:9
- 82:2-3
- 10:2
- 50:6-21 / 143:2
- 7:3-5,8

9:8-12/34:1-6 The LORD hears the cry of the poor.

Psalmists’ point of view is desiring that God come judge their case (many NT examples where Jesus refused this – dividing the inheritance between the brothers; placing James & John at his right hand). Numerous examples of a judgment that sets things right: Ps 9:8, 12; 68:5; 72:2; 76:9.

“They” reward evil for good – even when I pray and fast for them (Ps 35:12-14) – mirrored in Jesus’ exhortation to pray for our enemies.

Exceptions showing the Psalmist as defendant, not plaintiff: Ps 50: 6-21 (God as accuser) and Ps 143:2.

Difference between being right and being righteous. (Since “None is righteous”, the latter is a delusion.) Psalms are transparent in their belief in their ‘rightness’. “If I have done any such thing…tread my life down” (Ps 7:3-5). At any time, any (all?) of us have been in the right about something…sometimes with the ‘worse man’ being in the right against the ‘better man’, this having nothing to do with one’s character.

Fatal confusion between right & righteous. Ps. 7:3-5 ‘in the right’; 8 “according to my…innocency”.

Second fatal confusion – desire for justice vs. desire for revenge (vindictive Psalms – the Cursings). The vengefulness of the Cursing psalms makes many Psalms inaccessible – or at least unpopular – among priests & teachers.

SO – let’s dive in!
THE CURSINGS

Psalms to be reviewed:
109:5-13
137:9
69:23
143:12
139:19
23:5

Lewis describes the spirit in some of the cursings as
"a spirit of hatred which strikes...like the heat from a furnace mouth"
"ceasing to be frightful only be becoming almost comic in its naïveté"
"terrible or (dare we say) contemptible"

Ps 109
The curse in Ps 109 begins at v 6. Where Oxford uses ‘accuser’, others use Satan (in the sense of an accuser or perhaps informer). As the curse continues, “may his prayer be turned to sin” – Lewis positions this as plea to a judge rather than a prayer to God. [Oxford notes that the violent language of this section is to counter the ‘black magic curses’ of the psalmist’s enemies 17-19.]

The absolute confidence with which the psalmist pronounces curses on his (and God’s) enemies allows for interesting juxtapositions:

Ps 137
Ps 137 “By the streams of Babylon, there we sat and wept...Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” From lament to cursing.

Ps 69
Ps 69 shows a refinement of vengeance (in parallel)
“let their own table before them become a snare;
Let their sacrificial feast be a trap

Our contemporary phrase of ‘give them enough rope to hang themselves’ is not too far off this mark.

Ps139
Ps 139 “O Lord thou hast searched me and known me...Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?...For thou didst knit me together in my mother’s womb...How precious to me are thy thoughts...O that thou would slay the wicked O God...Do I not hate them that hate thee?... I hate them with a perfect hatred”.

Then, back to the sense of true judging he continues, (again using parallelism):

“Search me O God and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”
Ps 143
In Ps 143 – after a poignant and almost nostalgic longing for ‘the days of old’, the psalmist closes his prayers for deliverance and protection with:

“For thy name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life!
In thy righteousness bring me out of trouble!

And in thy steadfast love cut off my enemies
And destroy all my adversaries,
For I am thy servant.”

WAYS OF DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PSALMS:
1. Walk away. This is hard to do because:
   a. they are often very tightly interwoven with other ‘more acceptable’, if not exquisite, passages
   b. if we believe Holy Scripture is written for our learning there must be some use
   c. Jesus’ life and learning were steeped in these writings.
2. Make use of them...if so, what? What are our options?
   a. Explain them away
   b. Assume that since it is ‘Biblical’, vindictive hatred must be good and pious – or at least have a place.
   c. Using them as a mirror to reflect elements of ourselves.
3. Lewis noted a common feeling “Resentment, expressing itself with perfect freedom, without disguise, without self-consciousness, without shame as few but children express it.”
   a. Not because Hebrews had no restraints
   b. [To me, it speaks to an honest, guileless trust relationship that allows one – the Psalmist- to be brutally honest with the other party - God]
   c. Our society (and certainly Lewis’ England) drives us to be more subtle in our ‘cursings’. Who hasn’t said “what goes around...”, “Karma...”, “he made his bed...” – and in those predictions, we must admit a certain satisfaction.
4. Understanding the role we play in causing others to “curse” – what do we do to cause resentment, harm or injury in others? How does forgiveness relate to resentment? (When Jesus said 70 x 7 – did he mean 490 offenses or 490 ‘forgives’ for one offense?)
5. It is “monstrously simple-minded” to read the cursings only with shock and horror. What gave rise to such deep, passionate hatreds?
   a. Cruelty
   b. Injustice
   c. Injury to oneself
      i. Judaism taught ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’
      ii. ‘do not rejoice when your enemy falls’
      iii. ‘if your enemy hunger, give him bread’
6. “The higher, the more in danger” – It is the great, potential saints who become merciless fanatics. Those most ready to die for a cause are most ready to kill for it. This is true regardless of the cause – nationalism, religion. The higher the stakes, the greater the temptation to lose your temper. However, the absence of temptation does not commend one’s soul either. The timidity that prevents temptation also prevents ‘virtuous’ risk taking.
7. The absence of anger (esp. indignation) can be an alarming symptom. Thus, the bitter cursings of the Jews indicate how seriously they viewed right and wrong.
   a. Their cursings are often tied to things “hateful to God”; “God’s enemies”
   b. Leading to conclusions that since God must hate these as much as they do, he will judge/avenge (but why the delay?)
   c. Danger is encouraging the thought that one’s worst passions are holy “Thus saith the Lord” [Lewis suggests this, rather than idle swearing, is taking God’s name in vain]

8. When a soul begins an intentional spiritual/supernatural journey, possibilities abound for both good and evil – sanctity, love, humility and pride, self-righteousness, persecuting zeal. {Think of how St. Paul’s zealous persecution of the early Christians was re-formed in equally zealous building up the early church.}

“If the Divine call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse.

Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.”

Jesus echoes this in noting the harsher judgment for the shepherds – especially those who lead the little ones astray.

SUNG - Ps 34: “The Lord hears the cry of the poor” (Talbot); Taste & See; I will praise the Lord no matter what happens.
I have been unable to find any distinctively Jewish toasts except Lah'im & Mazaltov. Yiddish speaking Jews were renowned for their curses though and curses are nothing but the inverse of a toast and often have the same "May you..." form as a toast. The below are primarily eastern European Jewish curses derived from the Yiddish.

May you never be alone in bed: you should always have bedbugs, lice, fleas,

May you have twelve healthy children. And then may someone give one of them a whistle.

May they find thousands of new cures for you each year.

May you have devoted children to chase the flies off your nose.

May your daughter's beauty be admired by everyone in the circus.

May you grow so wealthy you can afford only the finest specialists.

You should be like a chandelier -- you should hang and burn.

May they name a baby after you!
(It means "Drop dead!" because, traditionally, babies are named after *dead* relatives.)

You should find a gold piece on the sidewalk and be so arthritic you can't pick it up.

May your blood turn to alcohol so all the fleas on your body get drunk and dance the mazurka in your belly button!

May you back into a pitchfork and grab a hot stove for support.

"Your head should be full of lice but your arms too short for you to scratch."

May you lose all your teeth, except for one -- and *that* one should hurt!

You should grow like an onion, with your head in the ground pointing towards hell.

May you win a lottery, and spend it all on doctors.

May you live in a house with a hundred rooms, and may each room have its own bed, and may you wander every night from room to room, and from bed to bed, unable to sleep.

I hope you swallow an umbrella and it opens up inside you

May you grow so rich that your widow's second husband never has to worry about making a living.

May you have lot of money, but you should be the only one in the family with it.