

Psalms

Praying with the Psalms

Introduction Part I

HISTORY

Historically, the Gospel narratives and the Psalms have been the two greatest sources for Christian meditation and contemplation in the Bible. The Psalter functioned as the Jewish “Common Prayer” book. Used in synagogues and private worship, it was Jesus’ “common prayer” book.

During the monastic period, the Psalms were read, recited, and prayed in continuous cycles. The famous rule of St. Benedict moves the participant through the whole Psalter in one week. The *Book of Common Prayer* (1552, revised 1662) of the Church of England provides a way to pray through or recite the whole Psalter in a month, in morning and evening common prayer. Calvin and the Reformed churches put the Psalms in metrical verse and set them to music for congregational song. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin wrote, “The design of the Holy Spirit [was] . . . to deliver the church a common form of prayer.”

Today, the Psalms have fallen into disuse for several reasons. First, there are the difficult passages (especially for modern sensibilities) seeking retribution on enemies, and many places of despondence. Second, more recent interpreters have been afraid to interpret the Psalter as referring to Christ, his person and work, even though Christ himself did so! Third, it takes some theological literacy to navigate the Psalms, and that literacy is no longer widespread. Finally, the Psalms are poetry that takes time to penetrate, while we live in a fast-paced culture with little time for reflection.

NEED

Why should we root our prayer life deeply in the psalms and prayers of the Bible?

The Psalms teach us to pray through imitation and response

We do not choose God; God chooses us (John 15:16). *Everything* we do toward God is a response to God’s initiative. Prayer, therefore, is primarily *answering* speech. ¹ In 2 Samuel 7, God sent David a prophetic word (vv. 4-16) and David then responded with a prayer, saying, literally: “O Sovereign LORD, you have spoken . . . so your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer” (vv. 19, 27). God’s speech *creates* real prayer. Real prayer is always an answer to God’s revelation. The Psalms are both prayer *and* revelation about God — the perfect soil for learning prayer.

Essential to the practice of prayer is to fully realize this secondary quality. . . . The first word is God’s word. [We are] never the first word, never the primary word . . . This massive, overwhelming *previousness* of God’s speech to our prayers, however obvious it is in Scripture, is not immediately obvious to us simply because we are so much more aware of ourselves than we are of God.

. . . Our personal experience in acquiring language is congruent with the biblical witness and provides an accessible . . . laboratory for verifying [this]. Because we learned language so early in our lives we have no clear memory of the process [and generally would “remember” that we took the initiative in beginning to speak]. But by observing our own children . . . we . . . confirm the obvious: language is spoken into us; we learn language by being spoken to. We are plunged at birth into a sea of language. . . . Then slowly, syllable by syllable, we acquire the capacity to answer: mama, papa, bottle, blanket, yes, no. Not one of these words was a first word.

. . . Question: Where then can we go to learn our language as it develops into maturity, as it answers God? Answer: The Psalms. The great and sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to learn . . . to pray.²

The Psalms take us deep into our own hearts

They do so a thousand times faster than we would ever go if left to ourselves. The Psalms also force us to deal with deep suffering and pain before we arrive there. They force us to look at praise and thanksgiving when we don’t feel them at all. All exercise is “against the grain” and so the Psalms pull and push us emotionally beyond our normal capacities.

[The Psalms] are God’s gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive (not patched together from emotional fragments scattered around that we chance upon) and honest (not a series of more or less sincere verbal poses that we think might please our Lord). . . . [If] we apprentice ourselves to these masters, acquiring facility by using the tools, . . . we become more and more ourselves. If we are willfully ignorant of the Psalms, we are not thereby excluded from praying, but we will have to hack our way through formidable country by trial and error and with inferior tools.³

The Psalms force us to deal with God as he is

This is the most important reason of all. Eugene Peterson explains:

In a world of prayers that indulge the religious ego and cultivate passionate longings, the Psalms stand out with a kind of angular austerity. . . . Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God that we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us . . . The Psalms . . . train us in that conversation. [We are] wrestled into obedience, subjected to the strenuous realities of living by faith in the God who reveals himself to us . . . There is a difference between praying to an unknown God whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God, revealed through Israel and Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first, we indulge our appetite for religious fulfillment; in the second we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun, the second is a lot more important. What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.

The Psalms were not prayed by people trying to understand themselves. They are not the record of people searching for the meaning of life. They were prayed by people who understood that God had everything to do with them. God, not their feelings, was the center. God, not their souls, was the issue. God, not the meaning of life, was critical. Feelings, souls, and meanings were not excluded — they are very much in evidence — but they are not the reason for the prayers. Human experiences might provoke the prayers, but they do not condition them . . . It is not simply a belief in [God] that conditions these prayers . . . but a *doctrine* of God. . . . We would rather pray by exploring our own deep spiritual capacities, with God as background music . . . without bothering with the tedium and complexity of the Scriptures . . . [But] if we elect the Psalms to train us in prayer, these are the conditions in which we will be working. ⁴

CLEARING THE GROUND

As we noted, one reason we don't use the Psalms more is because of theological ignorance or confusion. Here are some basic theological issues to settle.

The Imprecatory Psalms

Basically, we need to realize that the calls for justice found in these psalms are absolutely right. They remind us how important God's holiness and justice are. But we also need to realize that the psalmists did not have the justice of God completely satisfied in Christ, as we do. Thus we now pray for our enemies, instead of wishing them ill. Still, we as Christians can pray the imprecatory psalms as longings for social justice and hatred against the "principalities and powers" behind the world's evil.

The Despondent Psalms and Laments

These psalms, especially Psalms 39 and 88, leave us feeling as if the psalmist has "lost it"! Writing about Psalm 39, Derek Kidner notes, "The prayer of 13a makes no more sense than Peter's 'depart from me'; but God knows when to treat that plea as in Luke 5:8ff. and when as in Matthew 8:34f. The very presence of such prayers in Scripture is a witness to His understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate." ⁵

Christ in the Psalms

Much of the sweetness and light of the Psalms lies in the way they point to the Messiah to come, Jesus Christ. ⁶ How can we see him there? First, remember that Jesus did literally sing and pray the Psalms. Imagine what he thought of them in the different aspects of his person and work. Examples: (a) imagine

him singing the Psalms in his humanity, (b) in his deity, (c) in his humiliation, (d) in his exaltation. Always ask, "Where might this fit into his life?" For example, consider Jesus singing Psalm 27 on Easter Eve.

Second, imagine singing the psalm *to* Jesus. When you come to a lament psalm, you nearly automatically think of it in reference to suffering or feelings you have had. But remember what Jesus suffered. When you come to a psalm of refuge, remember that we "hide" in him and he covers our sins, shielding us from punishment, which ultimately is the only real danger. When you come to a psalm of wisdom, remember that the gospel is the only way to make sense of the ambiguities of life. You are a righteous sinner, living in the overlap of the ages.

As we have just seen, you don't need to look for Christ only in the traditional Messianic psalms. When Paul in Romans 15:8-9 quotes Psalm 18:49 as the words of Christ, he takes them from a psalm that seems to have no reference at all to any Messiah, anointed prince, or suffering servant. Why did he do it? Paul saw that Christ, as the Lord of the covenant, is the *object* of every psalm and, as the truest Servant of the Covenant, is the *subject* of every psalm. So, when you are seeking and searching out the Psalms, look at each one both ways. The Messianic psalms, however, are particularly rich views of Christ. They include the following:

- The Conquering King and enthroned Messiah (Psalms 2, 110)
- The Rejected Messiah (Psalm 118)
- The Betrayed Messiah (Psalms 69 and 109)
- The Dying and Raised Messiah (Psalms 22 and 16)
- The Written Plan and Marriage of the Messiah (Psalms 40 and 45)
- The Triumph of the Messiah (Psalms 68 and 72)

PRAYING THE PSALMS

Appendix A outlines two different ways to use the Psalms in your prayers. One way (explained in more detail in the Appendix) is called "Stream Prayer," in which you meditate on one or more psalms and then use the themes to guide your own prayers to the Lord. Allow fifteen or twenty minutes to pray through all the psalms you select. The steps, outlined below, are followed by an example of this method using Psalm 116.

1. Choose one (or more) psalms and read for comprehension in the NIV.**2. Pray each psalm several times.**

- (a) First, simply pray some of the petitions/statements to God, very close to the language in the psalm, but also somewhat in your own words. (See verses 17-18 below.)
- (b) Next, turn some of the statements into petitions to God. This will mean that even more of the prayer will be in your own words. (See verses 1-2 below.)
- (c) Do some praising, repenting, and supplication on the basis of some of the psalm's statements. This will be completely in your own words. (See verse 7 below.)

3. Move on to the next psalm (If you choose more than one) and do the same thing.

GROUP EXERCISE

1. Read Psalm 116 aloud in the NIV.**2. Pray the psalm several times with different group members taking turns.**

- (a) **First, simply pray some of the petitions/statements to God, very close to the language in the psalm, but also somewhat in your own words. For example, verses 17-18 might sound something like this:**

v. 17: I will sacrifice thank offerings to you, and call on your name,
O Lord.

v. 18: I will live a life consistent with my baptism, with my membership
in your church. I won't do this on my own, but in the community of your
people.

(b) Next, turn some of the statements into petitions to God. This will mean that even more of the prayer will be in your own words. For example, verses 1-2 might sound something like this:

v. 1: I love you Lord, for when I asked for mercy, you gave it to me. Lord, you have done it again and again.

v. 2: And for that, Lord, I will never stop depending on you — never. There's nowhere else I can go; nowhere else I should go.

(c) Do some praising, repenting, and supplication on the basis of some of the psalm's statements. This will be completely in your own words. For example, verse 7 might sound something like this:

v. 7: Oh, Lord, my heart does not rest in your goodness, it is not consoled deeply by your grace. It is too restless. Help me to know you. Let your goodness be so real to my heart that it is completely at rest.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 32.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, pp. 32-35.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 3-4.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God*, pp. 5-6, 14-15, 20.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 157.

⁶ See Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), chapter 4.