

Psalm Introduction

Eugene Peterson, *Praying with the Psalms*

Everyone prays – it is our most human action. We are connected somehow or other with God. That deep center often gets buried under the everyday debris of routine or distraction and chatter. Then a sudden jolt of pain, beauty, joy, opens up a moment of spontaneous prayer. When exposed, our core humanity, biblically called the *heart*, we revert to our first language – we pray.

For some that's the end of it – brief and random exclamations scattered haphazardly across a lifetime. But for other of us, not content to live incidentally, we hunt for ways to cultivate fluency. This journey often leads to the Psalms.

David's life is the most extensively narrated we have in scripture – his growing up and dying, his friends and his enemies, his sins and his salvation, his triumphs and defeats. Nothing is held back. For everything that happens in David's life became prayer. Alongside the story we are given his prayers. Nothing in David's life was left lying around on the surface; he took everything "to heart," internalized it, welcomed it in God's name for God's work.

The psalms, more than anything else in the church's life, are God's provision for the people who find themselves in this condition, directing and shaping the prayers of Christians into fluency. They do not do our praying for us – but they get us praying when we don't feel like it, and they train us in prayers that are honest and right. They are both encouragement to pray and patterns of prayer.

"The psalms acquire for those who know how to enter into them, a surprising depth, a marvelous and inexhaustible actuality. They are bread, miraculously provided by Jesus to feed those who have followed Him into the wilderness." – Thomas Merton.

Make yourself at him in the psalm. Once inside the psalms there is so much more to listen to, so much more to say. The Psalms are access to an environment in which God is the pivotal center of life, and in which other people, events, or circumstances are third parties.

The *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible*.

It is moving to know that anytime we sing or pray a psalm, we are never alone. We are always joining other somewhere around the world who are reciting it at the same time. We profit even more when we embrace the Psalm as the songs of God's people.

- They teach us and give us words to pray.
- They teach us about the world we live in with all its glory and brokenness.
- They teach us about the human condition, by sharing the prayers of others.
- They teach us the language of prayer.
- They give us words when we don't have words.
- They teach us to see, even when we are befuddled, how God is with us.

The Psalms are the Bible in miniature, and that is why Martin Luther insisted that we should pray them all.

The only way we can come to understand the Psalms is by praying them and using them in ways that allow them to shape us.

- It means embracing the text rather than holding them at arm's length.
- It means instead of working on the text, we let the text work on us.
- It means reading formationally rather than informationally.
- It means being vulnerable to hear how God might address us through the text rather than managing the text to serve our curiosity and need to control.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible*.

- Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with Him, whether the heart is full or empty.
- Just like the disciples (*Lord, teach us to pray*) we must learn to pray.
- A child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father.
- So we must learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us.
- God's speech in Jesus meets us in the Holy Scriptures. If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then scripture will be a solid basis.
- The words which come from God become then, the steps on which we find our way to God.
- Jesus brought every need, every joy, every gratitude, every hope before God.
- If we want to read and to pray the prayers of the Bible and especially the Psalms, we must not ask first what they have to do with us, but what they have to do with Jesus. We must ask how we can understand the Psalms.
- If the Bible contains this prayer book, we learn from this that not only that Word which He has to say to us belongs but also what he wants to hear from us.
- The Psalms are given to us to this end, that we may learn to pray them.
- Psalm 72:20 refers to all the preceding psalms as "*the prayers of David*."
- The psalms are for the most part set to music for worship and conversation with God.
- Throughout the history of the church, the Psalms were read weekly as part of the worship.
- The middle of most Psalms is known as the Sela, and indicates that "one must be still and quickly think though the words of the Psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers." – Luther.
- Bonhoeffer suggests they should be read daily or at least weekly, "When read only occasionally, these prayers are too overwhelming in design and power and tend to turn us back to more palatable fare. But whoever has begun to pray Psalms seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say, "Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalms." – Luther.
- We must take up the Psalm in our morning and evening prayers. – several a day – so that we read through the Psalms several times in a year.

- The Psalms were an integral part of the life of early Christianity. The church father Jerome records that one heard the Psalms being sung in the fields and gardens in his time.
- We should arrange the Psalms as:
 - Creation
 - The Law
 - Holy History
 - The Messiah
 - The Church
 - Life
 - Suffering
 - Guilt
 - Enemies
 - The End
- It would not be difficult to arrange them also according to the Lord's Prayer.

Of 150 Psalms, 73 attributed to King David; 12 to Asaph (songmaster appointed by David); 12 to the Levitical family of the children of Korah working under David, 2 to King Solomon, 1 to the music masters Herman and Ethan (probably employed by David and Solomon).

- After David's secret anointing as king, he was called to play the harp for King Saul, who was plagued by an evil spirit. (1 Sam. 16:23.) David drove out the spirit by song/hymn.
- David, as the anointed king, was a prototype of Jesus.
- What happened to David – happened to Jesus.
- In the Psalms of David, the promised Christ himself speaks (Heb. 2:12; 10:5); or, as may also be indicated by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 3:7).
- These same words which David spoke, the future Messiah spoke through him.
- The prayers of David were prayed by Jesus.
- *The Spirit of the Lord speak by me, his word is upon my tongue* and then follows a final prophecy about the coming King of righteousness, Jesus. (2 Sam. 23:1 f.)
- Who prays the Psalms?
 - David
 - Solomon, Asaph, etc.
 - Jesus
 - The Jewish community of the OT
 - The 1st Century New Church
 - 21 centuries of the Church
 - Us as a church
 - Each of us individually

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

The Book of Psalms, a collection of inspired Hebrew prayers and hymns, is a beloved portion of the OT; often appended to copies of the NT and used in worship and meditative prayer time. Yet the Psalms are often misunderstood and thus misused. The Bible is

often God's words to us, thus *from* God, but many fail to recognize that the Psalms also contains words *to* God or *about* God. They are addressed to God to express truth about God in song.

Psalms are profitable when used for the purposes intended by God who inspired them: for helping us:

- (1) to express ourselves to God; and
- (2) to consider His ways.

Psalms as Poetry: musical poems:

- (1) are addressed to the mind through the heart (intentionally emotive language);
- (2) musical poems cannot be read in the same way as a narrative or an epistle. While the Psalms contain and reflect doctrine, it is often with illustrations and illusions.
- (3) vocabulary of poetry is purposefully metaphorical – thus one must take care to look for the *intent* of the metaphor.

Psalms should also be viewed as Literature:

- (1) Psalms are of the several different *types*. so it is import to understand which it is.
- (2) Psalms are also characterized by its *form* – based on its structure.
- (3) Its *function* in the life of Israel
- (4) The *patterns* within the Psalm – arrangements or repetition of words and sounds.
- (5) Each Psalm must be read as a *literary unit* – not by individual verses or thoughts. “Because of the literary unity of any given psalm, therefore, one must be especially careful not to take individual verses out of context from a psalm, seeing them only in their own light, as if they did not need a context in which to be interpreted. (E.g., grasshoppers and locusts: 85:12; 105.)

Use of the Psalms in Ancient Israel – they were functional songs, composed to be used in worship – but not simply used as hymns as they are used today – rather they served the crucial function of making connection between the worshiper and God.

Types of Psalms:

- (1) **Laments** – more than 60, including individual and corporate laments – they express a deep, honest fervor the distress that people felt.
 - a. individual (e.g., 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142)
 - they help a person express struggles, suffering, or disappointment to the Lord.
 - b. corporate (e.g., 12, 44, 80, 137)
 - do the same for a group of people
- (2) **Thanksgiving Psalms** – the opposite of the Laments – express joy and gratefulness to the Lord – something had gone well, circumstances were

good, or a reason to render thanks to God for His faithfulness, protection, and benefit

- a. community psalms of thanksgiving (65, 67, 75, 107, 124, 136).
- b. individual psalms of thanksgiving (34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138).

(3) **Hymns of Praise** – center on the praise of God for who He *is*, for His greatness and His beneficence toward the whole earth, and His people – God deserves our praise. These psalms are especially adapted for individual or group praise in worship.

- a. Creator of the Universe (8, 19, 104, 148);
- b. Protector and benefactor of Israel (66, 100, 111, 114, 149);
- c. Lord of History (33, 103, 113, 117, 145-147).

(4) **Salvation History Psalms** – focus a review of the history of God's saving works among the people of Israel, especially deliverance and creation of the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. (78, 105, 106, 135, 136).

(5) Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation

- a. Renewal liturgies: designed to lead God's people to a renewal of the covenant (50, 81)
- b. Davidic covenant psalms: praise the importance of God's choice of the lineage of David (89, 132)
- c. Royal Psalms – deal with his kingship (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 144). Psalm 18 is a royal thanksgiving psalm, while 144 is a royal lament. The kingship in ancient Israel was an important institution because through it God provided stability and protection.
- d. Enthronement Psalms – celebrated the enthronement of the king – which may have been repeated annually (and perhaps the enthronement of the Lord himself) (24, 29, 47, 93, 95-99).
- e. Songs of Zion/Songs of the City of Jerusalem – according to the predictions of God through Moses to the Israelites while they were in wilderness, Jerusalem was the promised city where the temple would be built and the eventual kingship throne. (46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).
- f. Wisdom Psalms – praising the merits of wisdom and a wise life (36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133, Prov. 8).
- g. Songs of Trust – center their attention upon the fact that God can be trusted and even in times of despair, His goodness and care for His people ought to be express (11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131).
 - God delights in knowing that those who believe in Him trust Him for their lives and for what He will choose to give them.

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book – A guided tour.*

- 150 psalms of rich diversity which served as a hymnbook for postexilic Judaism.
- Date from the early monarchy to a time after the exile (1000-400 B.C.)

- Emphases: trust and praise Yahweh for his goodness, lament over wickedness and injustices, Yahweh as king of the universe and the nations, Israel's king as Yahweh's representative
- Three collections of Davidic Psalms (3-41; 51-70; 138-145)
- Two collections of "Asaph/sons of Korah" Psalms (42-50; 73-88)
- Four Topical collections:
 - God's kingship (93-100)
 - Psalms of Praise (103-107)
 - Psalms of ascent (pilgrimage songs) (120-134)
 - Hallelujah Psalms (111-113, 146-150)
- Placed in Five Books – probably with the Pentateuch in view (thus David corresponds to Moses).
 - Book 1 (1-41 – all titled "of David" except 1, 2, 33)
 - Introduction to the Psalter (1, 2)
 - Five Laments (3-7)
 - Praise to the Creator (8)
 - Lament for Deliverance of the "Righteous Poor" (9-13)
 - Folly of Humankind (14; see also 53)
 - On Access to the Temple (15-24)
 - Prayer, Praise and Trust in the King of Creation (25-33)
 - Instruction on Godly Wisdom and Appeals against Wickedness (34-37)
 - Four Laments: Prayer and Confession of Sin (38-41)
 - Book 2 (42-72)
 - Books 1 & 2 basically assume the time of the early monarchy, as David speaks words of lament and praise, both for himself and for the people, based on Yahweh's unending goodness and righteousness. They are book ended by two key canonical psalms (2 and 72) that extol the king as Yahweh's anointed one for the sake of his people.
 - Three Prayers and a Royal Psalm (42-45)
 - In Celebration of Zion (46-48)
 - On the Proper Stance before God (49-53)
 - Six Laments: Prayer for Help (54-59)
 - Five Prayers with Common Themes (60-64)
 - In Praise of God's Awesome Deeds and Presence (65-68)
 - Three Prayers and a Royal Psalm (69-72)
 - Book 3 (73-89 "of Asaph" or "of the sons of Korah")
 - features the presence of some prominent exilic and post exilic laments (fall of Jerusalem).
 - On Rejection and Hope for Zion (73-78)
 - In Celebration of Zion, and Lament over Its Demise (84-89)
 - Book 4 (90-106 mostly untitled except 101, 103 "of David")

- begins by going back to Moses, then two psalms of trust and thanksgiving (91-92), and then a collection of Yahweh's kingship (93-100); and ends with psalms of praise (101-106) and ends with a plea to gather the exiles (106:47).
 - Yahweh Our Dwelling Place (90-92)
 - Yahweh Reigns, Let the People Rejoice (93-99)
 - In Praise of Yahweh and in Hope of Restoration (100-106)
- Book 5 (107-150 mostly untitled, but fifteen are "of David")
 - begins with a psalm of praise that assumes the gather of exiles (107:2-3), and is followed by an acclamation of God's rule over all nations (108).
 - In Praise of God's Rescue of His People and 2 Davidic Laments (107-109)
 - Psalms 110 and 118 were used for anticipation of the coming of the great future king (used often by early Christians to understand Christ).
 - The Coming King, and Festival Psalms (110-118)
 - In Celebration of the Law, Yahweh's Word (119)
 - 120-134 Songs of assent
 - In Response to the Ascents (135-137)
 - The Final Davidic Collection (138-145 "of David")
 - Fivefold Hallelujah (146-150): "Hallelujah" psalms – reminder of God's ultimate sovereignty over all things.

The five books are carefully arranged so that they mirror the story of Israel from the time of David until after the exile. The collection of psalms, which is the voice of Yahweh's people singing to Him in praise and prayer, functions also to remind them – and us – of the central role of worship in the biblical story, worship that focuses on the living God by recalling his essential goodness and love and his wondrous deeds on their behalf.

The psalms were written first of all to be sung – one by one and not necessarily in their biblical order; we should remember the *theological* bases that they were written.

1. all have a "people of God" dimension – an individual is always aware of being part of the people who together belong to God in covenant relationship and who share the same story.
2. Yahweh is the center of everything.
3. Our lives are predicated on this covenant relationship to God the creator of all and therefore God of all.
4. Yahweh's character, especially his love and faithfulness, but also his mercy, goodness, and righteousness.
5. They repeatedly echo the significant moments in their sacred history as God's people.

Carmen Joy Imes, *Praying the Psalms with Augustine and Friends.*

Jesus and the NT writers quote the Psalms more than any other OT books – a remarkable 41% of the OT quotations in the NT. Jesus alludes to the Psalms more than 50 times.

When we pray the Psalms, we are joining a long line of faithful men and women stretching thousands of years, all the way back from Moses to David and then Jesus – who have sought God’s help.

“The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of love persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious inhabitant (Eph. 2:19-22; 3:10). The Bible traces the formation of this community from the creation in the Garden of Eden all the way to the new heaven and the new earth. Come, join us as we explore the many dimensions of this with-God history – from individuals to family to tribe to people to nation to all humanity – and apply what we learn to our own spiritual formation.” *The People of God in Prayer and Worship – Psalms* in the Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible, p. 769.

We hear the ways God nurtures this all-inclusive community through development of liturgical **praise** and **prayer**.

- The psalmist sings to us that God is “*enthroned on the praises of Israel*” and addresses God as “*you who answer prayer*” (22:3; 65:2).
- How the People of God are formed spiritually.
- Psalms are works of art that embody what cannot simply be stated or said.
- Psalms are primary instruments for forming the inner life of the faithful.
- Desperate condition of humans – the unlimited greatness of God.

Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*.

We find the first example of Psalms in the early church in Acts 4:24-30 where Christians are praying a section from Psalm 2.

Our dear Lord, who has given to us and taught us to pray the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer, grant to us also the spirit of prayer and of grace so that we pray with enthusiasm and earnest faith, properly and without ceasing, for we need to do this, He has asked for it, and therefore wants to have it from us. To Him be praise, honor, and thanksgiving, Amen. – Luther.

Further possible resources:

Robert Adler, *The Book of Psalms* (A translation with Commentary);

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit)

Eugene Peterson, *Praying with the Psalms* (A Year of Daily Prayers and Reflections on the Words of David);