

Worship

Worship in the Psalms

Lesson #7 for August 13, 2011

Scriptures: Psalms 90:1,2; 100:1-5; 73; 49; 141:2; 20:3; 54:6; 78:1-8.

1. The book of Psalms is a complete panorama of human emotions and ideas. Many of the psalms are prayers which have been put to music—reminding us that the Hebrew word translated *psalms* means “to sing with instrumental accompaniment.”
2. What are we supposed to learn from these prayer-songs? Consider some of the emotional tones and themes we find in the Psalms: penitence which express sorrow for sin, laments, true happiness, pilgrimages, acrostics or alphabetic psalms, suffering, discouragement, trust, confession, anger, the king’s glory, despair and hope, security, God’s universal reign, forgiveness, God’s sovereignty, praise for the Lord, vengeance, the history of Israel, wedding songs, doubt about God’s care, Sabbath observance, eschatology, *Yom Kippur*, and Passover.
3. While the small subtitles at the tops of the psalms were not apparently originally included in the Psalms, they are very ancient and may be valid. They suggest the following individuals were writers of the Psalms: King David, who wrote more than seventy; King Solomon, who apparently only wrote one of which we know (compare 1 Kings 4:32); the sons of Korah (this was the Korah that was swallowed up by the earth as recorded in Numbers 16); Asaph; Heman the Ezrahite (the grandson of Samuel); Ethan the Ezrahite; Moses; someone from the Babylonian exile; and “an afflicted man.” We know that women such as Deborah and Hanna wrote poetry. (See Judges 5 and 1 Samuel 2) However, we are not aware of any women who wrote psalms included in the book of Psalms. There are a number of psalms which have no author attributed to them, and some of those could have been written by women.
4. What happened to all those psalms and proverbs that Solomon wrote? Were many of them not “inspired”? Or, were they just lost? We have only two known songs of Solomon—Psalm 72 and The Song of Solomon. Psalm 127 may have been written by Solomon, but it was probably written about him.
5. Why do we need to pray? People who have not been raised in a Christian home may find it strange to speak to God. How should those people—and we—go about it? Consider this from *The Message*:

Most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have learned to pray by praying the Psalms. The Hebrews, with several centuries of a head start on us in matters of prayer and worship, provided us with this prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us.

The stimulus to paraphrase the Psalms into a contemporary idiom comes from my lifetime of work as a pastor. As a pastor I was charged with, among other things, teaching people to pray, helping them to give voice to the entire experience of being human, and to do it both honestly and thoroughly. I found that it was not as easy as I expected. Getting started is easy enough. The impulse to pray is deep within us, at the very center of our created being, and so practically anything will do to get us started—“Help” and “Thanks!” are our basic prayers. But honesty and thoroughness don’t come

quite as spontaneously.

Faced with the prospect of conversation with a holy God who speaks worlds into being, it is not surprising that we have trouble. We feel awkward and out of place: “I’m not good enough for this. I’ll wait until I clean up my act and prove that I am a decent person.” Or we excuse ourselves on the grounds that our vocabulary is inadequate: “Give me a few months—or years!—to practice prayers that are polished enough for such a sacred meeting. Then I won’t feel so stuttery and ill at ease.”

My usual response when presented with these difficulties is to put the Psalms in a person’s hand and say, “Go home and pray these. You’ve got wrong ideas about prayer; the praying you find in these Psalms will dispel the wrong ideas and introduce you to the real thing.” A common response of those who do what I ask is surprise—they don’t expect this kind of thing in the Bible. And then I express surprise at their surprise: “Did you think these would be the prayers of *nice* people? Did you think the psalmists’ language would be polished and polite?”

Untutored, we tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not. Inexperienced, we suppose that there must be an “insider” language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental, not advanced, language. It is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.

But even with the Psalms in their hands and my pastoral encouragement, people often tell me that they still don’t get it. In English translation, the Psalms often sound smooth and polished, sonorous with Elizabethan rhythms and diction. As literature, they are beyond compare. But as *prayer*, as the utterances of men and women passionate for God in moments of anger and praise and lament, these translations miss something. *Grammatically*, they are accurate. The scholarship undergirding the translations is superb and devout. But as *prayers* they are not quite right. The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people, couched in cultured language.

And so in my pastoral work of teaching people to pray, I started paraphrasing the Psalms into the rhythms and idiom of contemporary English. I wanted to provide men and women access to the immense range and the terrific energies of prayer in the kind of language that is most immediate to them, which also happens to be the language in which these psalm prayers were first expressed and written by David and his successors.

I continue to want to do that, convinced that only as we develop raw honesty and detailed thoroughness in our praying do we become whole, truly human in Jesus Christ, who also prayed the Psalms. (Introduction to Psalms, *The Message*)

Try reading the *King James Version* and compare *The Message* for Psalms 22:16-22. Do we dare to speak to God as to a friend? (See John 15:15) Can we use the ordinary

language that we use in everyday speech for our prayers? Can we tell God how we really feel about things?

6. What is the relationship between psalms, prayers, songs, and worship? What are the main themes for worship? Who God is? Who our Creator is? God's power? God's care for us? His redemption of us? Nature? The biblical history? Virtually any major theme that you can find in Scripture will have a psalm written about it.
7. Why do people write poetry? Are poems written primarily as emotional outlets? Is some poetry based on deep personal conviction? Were any of the biblical writers actually paid to write songs? Maybe the sons of Korah or Asaph?
8. There are a number of psalms based on prayers of personal distress and suffering. Almost always, the psalms end up praising God for His deliverance from those problems. But, what do we do with psalms that focus on retribution—even vengeance? (Psalms 35, 52, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 140) Psalm 69 has several verses that are thought to be Messianic, but other parts of that psalm are full of vengeance and certainly do not reflect what Jesus would have said. Is it fair to pick a few words out of the middle of a psalm like that and call them Messianic? How should we respond to passages like Psalms 137:8,9 (GNB): "Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy are those who pay you back for what you have done to us—who take your babies and smash them against a rock." Is it ever right for a child of God to pray such a prayer? Why was this psalm included in Scripture? Fortunately, if you keep reading, things usually get better. Should we be honest with God about our emotions? Even about our unchecked emotions?
9. Read Psalm 23 in a modern version. How does it make you feel? Does it comfort you?
10. There are many Jews and Christians who read the Psalms and take delight in the fact that God will punish their enemies! It may not happen soon, but it will happen in the end! Should Christians be thinking such thoughts? Is it all right to be honest with God in our prayers? What about our songs? Or, does God weep over each of His lost children as He sadly lets them go? (Hosea 4:11-17; 11:1-8) Will God weep as His wicked children perish in the end? Will we weep with Him? Or someday, will God really pour out vengeance on His—and our—enemies?
11. An intimate knowledge of the book of Psalms should help us to be honest in our dialogues/prayers with/to God. Are we honest in our prayers? Do we pray for our enemies? Do we pray that God will help them? Or, that God will destroy them?
12. William Wordsworth defined poetry as, "The spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility." We often speak of poetic license. Are poets—even under inspiration—allowed to exaggerate? Does it seem a little exaggerated to say, "Every night tears drench my bed"? (Psalms 6:6, *New Living Translation*) Or, "Day and night, I have only tears for food"? (Psalm 42:3, *NLT*) Or, "You have fed us with sorrow and made us drink tears by the bucketful"? (Psalms 80:5, *NLT*) Or, "Rivers of tears gush from my eyes because people disobey your law"? (Psalms 119:136, *NLT*). Are these words of exclamation inspired? Did God intend for them to come out like that?
13. Some psalms like Psalm 73 speak of God's judgment. Is His judgment retributive and vengeful? Are we thankful that God will "make it right"? Or, are God's judgments always completely fair, and each person will receive judgment "according to his deeds"? (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14; Revelation 20:12,13)
14. Quite a number of psalms talk about social injustice. The rich take advantage of the poor. The powerful abuse the weak. Does it give you satisfaction when you think of these issues

to realize that rich and poor alike end up in the grave? (Psalm 49) Is it helpful to realize that we all depend on the same plan of salvation?

15. A number of psalms talk about nature. Paul tells us in Romans 1:20 that anyone who has access to nature is without excuse if he does not worship God. Do you agree with that conclusion? What can we learn from psalms like Psalms 19, 65, 104, and 139:13-18?
16. Ellen White described the child Jesus as loving to go out into nature even very early in the morning, communing with His Father, praying, studying the Scriptures, and singing praises. (*Desire of Ages* 89.6) Did He memorize some of these Psalms that we are studying? Which Psalms do you think were His favorites?
17. The tent-sanctuary—and Solomon’s Temple in later years—were often the subject of prayer and song. What are we supposed to learn from the sacrificial-sanctuary system about the death of Jesus on behalf of humanity? Does reading Hebrews 10:1-4 help to clarify things? Should we be focusing on a system which is nothing more than a faint shadow of the truth? (Hebrews 10:1-4) Was the sacrificial-sanctuary system of the Old Testament a means to an end? Or, was it an end in itself?
18. Three of the longer psalms in the Old Testament hymnal are Psalms 78, 105, and 106. These psalms recount Israel’s history. When you look back at the history of Israel, is that a reason to rejoice? To weep? Or, to despair? What about our history?

We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history. {*Life Sketches* 196.2}

19. Many of the Psalms encourage us to study the Word of God. An example that is familiar is, “Your word is a lamp to guide me and a light for my path.” (Psalm 119:105, *GNB*). Do we find this to be true in everyday life? Have we experienced times when God has worked miraculously to protect us or a family member? On a regular basis, do we recount these deliverances in prayer and praise? What other things have happened to us that should call forth prayer and song?
20. Have you ever wished that you could hear the Psalms sung and played in their original Hebrew language using the ancient instruments of music? Since singing the Psalms was a way to memorize them and since we can hear the way Psalms are sung or led by the cantor in Jewish worship, is that the original form of the Psalms? Have they preserved the music as well as the words of at least some of the Psalms?
21. Those of us who believe in the great-controversy, trust-healing model of the plan of salvation tend to focus on the quiet convictions that arise from a careful study of Scripture. What role should emotion play in this paradigm? Does learning the truth about God lead to joy, praise, and thanksgiving? If not, why not?

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Info@theox.org

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