

9:16/11:01 Teaching Bumper

Praying Like the Psalms

Intro and Setup:

The year had to be somewhere late 90s to early 2000s. What I do know for sure is that I was attending a worship & arts conference in Vancouver, British Columbia and that one singular moment changed the course of some twenty years of ministry. The speaker was covering the topic of songs in gathered worship and then used the word “terminate.”

That was different.

We’ve all had those moments where we hear something, either completely new, or a known idea that strikes us with a sense of clarity and poignancy. This was one of my moments.

As she unpacked the idea, I began to think about the concern of where worship songs “end up.” She used the word terminate, as in their summation, or maybe the sense of “where do they land.” And her challenge to all of us was that worship songs must “land” in the nature and character of God.

I had many good mentors and teachers point me to the teaching value of songs. I was there with her. But she began to paint another picture: that the *expression* of the very real and present circumstances of God’s people—both individually, and as the Body—was of primary and equal value in the course of a few verses and choruses. There was a journey to be had. It could contain and support both. The real question was: pick one or other and what do we have? Truth without connection? Or maybe connection without truth?

She pressed us into a false dichotomy. But then led us to the urgent call that given both, the landing place must always be in the things that never change. If flying above the airfield is the metaphor, and it’s quite possible that the expression of “fuel” is the invitation; that’s all fine and good, but you better know where the strip is, and that ultimately you’ll be safest there, when wheels down is achieved.

So, when I saw the Psalms as a possible focus for the prayer series, I immediately thought of this idea, pressed into me so many years ago. I am hoping this will be of some use as we comb these Scriptural gifts for a sense of what the Lord may be calling us to in the great privilege of prayer.

Let’s talk about Praying Like the Psalms.

Context and Scope:

Here’s some quick things to note about the Psalms:

The Psalms are a form of ancient poetry that employs **repetition of ideas, rather than common sounds.**

The Psalms were **written over the course of about a thousand years.**

While **David has a byline in at least half of them**, these notes could indicate authorship, inspiration, or someone writing “in the style of” David. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls puts his artistic output at 3600 songs. Quite the “body of work”, as they say, and with that many hits under his belt, a good chance he is actually the composer of many of what we have. The ones with connection to events in the OT history books are a little easier to ascribe as his, others less so.

The Psalms are poetry. But they are as far from some of our modern misconceptions about poetic verse as you can get. We comedically associate poetry with smoky rooms, intellectuals, and beret-clad hipsters: content that is honest and raw, hopefully insightful, but almost universally nihilistic. No answers. Only struggle. And to a certain degree the common realization that the world we live in is horribly broken as *the* unifying experience. Maybe something to hold us together.

But to the Psalmists, there is always an answer. One single answer. Yet they never cheapen the struggle in fostering a sense that this answer is easy, or easily attainable.

Non-Psalms poets seem at times overwhelmed, maybe rightly so, at the scope and depth of our pain.

The Psalmists would charge that they stop too soon in their efforts.

Structurally, the Book of Psalms is arranged in five books. Jewish scholars see this as parallelism to the five books of the Law. God gave the Law through Moses. God gave the Psalms (largely and representatively) through David. There is no strict organization as to content, though they carry some measure of general arrangement and use. For example, the songs used on special occasions are mostly to be found in Psalms 107-150.

But they do cover a lot of ground:

Wisdom sayings, not unlike Proverbs or Ecclesiastes:

Psalm 1: "blessed is the one..."

Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good."

Proclamation of spiritual realities, sometimes with the indication of the Coming Rescuer:

Ps. 19: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Ps. 2:7

I will proclaim the Lord's decree:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have become your father.

Straight-up praise and exaltation of God and His acts:

Ps. 47:5-7

"God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the Lord amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise."

Lamenting the state of humanity and calling on God to act:

Ps. 10:14-15

“you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked man;
call the evildoer to account for his wickedness
that would not otherwise be found out.”

But it **doesn't take long for them to get quite personal.**

Ps. 3:1-2

Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him.”

See also Ps. 22, 25; 55 (David betrayed); Cave Psalms? 57

It's this last focus of these amazing works that challenges and encourages me with regard to prayer. After all, one might consider them artful, group prayer, sung to ancient near-eastern music—of which we have no particular record. In that sense, they were likely accompanied by microtonal melodies, quite foreign to our western ears. Think more “snake charmer” than Bach. But even then, I learned a while back that the famous (hum tune) line is a complete fabrication, composed by an American marketing firm for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. They needed something for the international exhibits. It stuck. And now we consider it as authentically middle-eastern.

But I digress.

If we want to associate the Psalms with music from our realm of experience we might want to think “blues” more than pop. If we want to go classical, maybe more epic minor key than flowing orchestral ballad.

Here's the deal:

Orthodox Jews refer to the Psalms as ***Tehelim*—“songs of praise.”**

And **about half of them qualify as complaint, grief, disappointment, or urgent pleas for help.**

They are brutally transparent about the physical, spiritual, and emotional conditions of the writer. Let's pause there. Half of them?

Sure. That's a bit shocking. But think about it. That means a significant portion of God's revelation to us in these works is framed at the very deepest level of our need. Maybe that's not so surprising when we hear that Jesus is the final and perfect High Priest, one who sympathizes with our weaknesses, from the book of Hebrews. Or, in Psalm 10:17 where we read:

**“You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry... “**

But it goes a step deeper still, from mere concern to the ways that struggle is embodied, written in a form (poetry) that is intended to dig beneath the normal layers of just agreeing that things are bad.

God is saying more here. He's providing more here. He's identifying with our pain. He's embodying this empathy in nothing less than His Word and, no less, crafting His Word in a setting and structure that reaches to the deeper parts of our souls.

It's one thing for God to make a list of the hard things humans face in this life. That tells us He's aware.

When He shapes it with an artistic and emotional bent, we might see something different. A new shade of care and extension to our plight.

Still, the Psalms don't play around. Nothing seems out of bounds.

Fear of death: [text]

Betrayal:

Character assassination:

Shattered dreams:

Disease:

Shame, both personal and national:

Yes, the Book that comes directly from His mind and heart includes these 150 poems. And about half of them mirror our sadness, our burdens, our fears, our lostness at the level of universal human experience.

Which frames up my first observation about the Psalms with respect to prayer.

Observation 1:

The Psalms are honest. Brutally so. The fact they are included in Scripture gives me a sense my payers might be granted the same invitation.

[Bruce Almighty scene] or maybe something about Psalm 69 here

There's a number of things about this scene that we could have vigorous theological conversation around. So, while not endorsing the overall theology of this film, I am absolutely endorsing the honesty of this scene. And, while shrinking back a little at his challenge for God to smite, I seem to remember a man under a withering leaf that felt at least some commonality with this cry.

Do you feel this way as you pray? Have you received the leeway to lay it all out there before the Lord? Or is there a sense you have to realtime edit your life before the One who gave it to you in the first place? Look, we all do it. Every now and then we wonder if we're praying, or just complaining. Well, there's likely a heart issue to wrestle there but at face value the Psalms are a bit of a no-holds barred scenario. There doesn't seem to be much, if anything, off limits.

It's good news the Psalms are brutally honest.

It's even better news that they are to be a model for both our personal prayer and corporate gathering.

There is some ongoing conversation about whether the entirety of the Psalms was meant for or utilized in congregational worship. It's a bit of a challenge to place the calls for the destruction of Israel's enemies and imagery of a physical Temple no longer standing into our context. Not many of us, I would offer, carry the weight and challenges of being a monarch. And then some of the Psalms are just so intensely personal. But wait. That's the good news also.

Psalms 13: 1 says, "O Lord, how long will you forget me?"

As if that isn't painful enough, the next line goes to the edge, the place no one wants to go but is almost demanded to by certain realities:

"Forever?"

But in this excruciating moment, our eyes are drawn to the note at the top of the text:

"For the director of music."

Directing usually implies playing music in the presence of others. Don't miss this. Apparently, one of the hardest moments in the brutally honest Psalms had corporate use.

Sometimes we sing songs that you may not personally identify with, in the moment. That can cause an understandable disconnect.

While we all may not immediately identify with a corporate expression of trial, we can always say yes to standing side by side with those currently afflicted.

A number of years ago a godly friend and mentor confessed that he was struggling with a "new" song that seemed to really be catching on in worship. While he would always say--and his life demonstrated this to be true--that he held Christ as the absolute need of His life, he found it hard to sing the phrase, "And I.... I'm desperate for You." Others sang it with abandon. He was left feeling on the outside. It wasn't the truth of the matter. It was the emotional content of the moment. But it didn't match his current situation.

I was really confused. The song spoke deeply to me as a powerful means of confession and expression.

I am sure he has done it many times, probably even then. But I think I would have experienced it even more powerfully if he had identified those "disconnects" in worship as a means of singing the truth over me and with me. People, don't ever underestimate the power of identifying and standing together as we gather. It can happen in song, in teaching, in prayer.

The Psalms show us an honesty for our own lives and toward the brokenness around us.

Yes, the Psalms are honest. Brutally so. And they have application for both our personal prayer lives and our church family moments.

But there's another observation we should make clear with respect to encouraging a life of prayer.

Observation 2:

The Psalms are honest. They are also quite insistent.

What do they insist *on*? What is it they doggedly present as the presupposition for all our questions?

How do they differ from poetry that presents the good value of communal identification as the end of the line? You know, the idea that there is no answer. None at all. Just trial. But we're all in this together, so there's that...

The Psalms insist that *God is*:

Present—Psalm 139:7-10

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

True—Psalm 33:4

For the word of the Lord is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.

Unique— Psalm 86:8-10

Among the gods there is none like you, Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.
... you alone are God.

Just—Psalm 33:5

The Lord loves righteousness and justice.

Forgiving—Ps. 86:5

You, Lord, are forgiving and good,
abounding in love to all who call to you.

I can imagine some of you have caught that I am not dwelling much in the other half of the Psalms. You're right. And it stands to reason that if 50% of them are hard, then 50% may be of a more joyful nature. You're right again. But those seem relatively user-friendly. Joyful circumstances? Praise God? That make sense to us. And the equation is essentially the same:

Things going well? Don't forget that God is...

So, in turning back to the tougher stuff:

Not going so well? Don't forget that God is...

Can you see what we miss when we stop short of this grand invitation? What we trade away when we take the first good step of honesty but fail to move into the truth that *God is*...

How could any of these statements address our deepest need? I don't mean to minimize any of our pain, but please, if we have stepped into a life of faith, what more are we looking for than the immovable reality of a Father who is all these things and more?

And, if you'd honestly say you don't know whether there is a God or what He's like: this list, which the Psalms never waver from, seems a very attractive reason to pursue the matter more.

But... I get it.

It's the question of *why don't I feel any better?* Why doesn't God heal me? Why do I have to wait? The way we treat one another is such a burden with no end in sight...

Now, you're starting to sound like a Psalmist.

If... and that's a big if, you take this next step of *insistence* as well.

Counterintuitively, the Psalms don't call us to dwell endlessly in our circumstances, or even to ask the question *why?* all that much. And when the question does appear it's never the endpoint or sole focus of the discussion, as if uncovering the apparent or even unconscious motives of those arrayed against us is the place we're supposed to spend the majority of our time.

Why? Because the focal point of the Psalms is not the story of human trial. The main actor in the Psalms, as in all of Scripture, is God. He's the hero. He's the focus. He's the answer.

Here's something that can go unnoticed. In the vast majority of the Psalms majoring in trial, there is a "catch." Sometimes at the beginning, sometimes buried in the middle. Often at the end of the matter.

[Three pairs of "catches"]

Ps. 69: 1-3a and 13

...I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters;
the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help;

[13]

But I pray to you, Lord,
in the time of your favor;
in your great love, O God,
answer me with your sure salvation.

Ps. 55:4-5 and 23 (last verse)

My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen on me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.

[23] But as for me, I trust in you.

Ps. 31:10-11 and 14-15a

My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—
those who see me on the street flee from me.

[14-15a] But I trust in you, Lord;
I say, "You are my God."
My times are in your hands;

These "catches" are where we are invited to move from the good place of honesty to an even better place of hope. But it is a hope that sometimes doesn't see the end from here.

How could that be hopeful at all? Ah, now we're talking mystery. Faith. Trust. This is the stuff of following Jesus. I wish I had a better answer for you than this but, after walking with God for some 40 years of this life, I am coming more and more to identify faith as "just not giving up on Jesus." Sometimes it's a bit more than that. But in the darkness, in the toughest stuff, it's literally putting **one more foot forward on the sole proposition that God is still who He said He was.**

Which brings me to the third observation about praying like the Psalms.

And it's **a sense in which we might say the Psalms *do not* insist...**

Simply put, the Psalms neither promise nor demand an immediate resolution to anything we are being honest about while simultaneously framing them up in the nature and character of God. This is where we notice that:

Observation 3:

Praying like the Psalms is both an immediate help and a long game.

Well, let me clarify just a little. It's an immediate help that might not immediately make me feel better or bring resolution to my struggle. And, it's a long game that requires moments of quick response, even when I don't feel like it.

Awesome. Sign me up.

Here's where the little voice comes in and says something like, "Wayne, that was the very worst sales job for Christianity. Ever."

Which is good, too. No sales pitch here. Not sure what it is about the imagery of carrying a cross, losing your life, or the promise that "... everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim. 3:12) that gives us a sense that all is going to go well for us as those who follow Jesus.

There is deep joy in Christ. He is our provider and King. Our friend and Savior.

But folks, life is messed up. Not because God made it this way and then decided it would be fun to release a bunch of little moral beings into it and watch them squirm and struggle. His plan was good. Perfect, as a matter of fact. But that's not what went down.

Living in a world *we broke* brings brokenness. Right to our doorstep.

And our emotions are a horrible barometer for what is true if you sign on for that worldview. Actually feeling bad about things should be a given—normal—when the damage is this deep, this systemic.

But *feelings can change*. The challenge is, *they only change when given good enough reason to*.

We need to give them the very best shot to come into line.

I am sure I have not experienced the level of pain and sorrow that some in this room have. But there are a few seasons in my life where I would say things went almost completely opposite of how I had planned or desired. And they weren't trivial matters.

Here's what I remember about a particular moment that comes to mind. It was a long, drawn out process. At each step of the way, I rallied, thinking there was still hope. So, I'd take one more step. Then another. Another. Then came the email and I knew it wasn't going to go the way I wanted. No more options. End of the line. I can still remember exactly where I was standing when it hit me.

I stopped and I prayed. I said "okay."

That was about it.

But I think it was an honest moment. "Lord, I have no clue why this happened. But, okay."

Now, here's another observation. This happened when I was in my late 40s. I got saved when I was twelve. Do the math and there's a few years of growing and trusting there.

I do believe the life of faith is a cumulative kind of thing. And it seems to me now that the space between my feelings being out of order, stepping forward in faith, and then my emotions following, happens a little faster with every year I follow Christ.

That moment, where the best I could muster was that quiet "okay" was probably built from the ground up, over four decades. Yeah, I'd expect a little better from a pastor, too. Some kind of epic statement of faith in the face of unknown trials...

But finding the peace that God offers carries a contingency. There's a partnership and a part we play. Paul urged the Philippians to present their requests to God. That sounds like prayer to me. He told them to bathe those requests in thanksgiving. And then peace, an unbreakable peace, a guarded and protected peace of the mind, would be the result. Isaiah 26:1 frames this up beautifully.

“You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.”

Maybe every time I said “okay” through the years led me to that singular moment of saying okay. Maybe it’s like deposits. No, maybe more like an endowment, where the principal is laid down over time but never spent. Just the growth. The interest. The yield.

9:51/11:36

[Grandad worship moment story if time]

I am certain that many of you have stood in this place in the same manner, in times of great distress, and been able to call your soul to say, “Lord, You are good, yes You are good, Lord You are good to me.”

If that seems too far a horizon for your heart, even today, may I invite you to the fact that burning off fuel in the air is an absolutely acceptable and sometimes necessary act. But, the safety of the tarmac beckons, and says, “Come on, let’s get you onto solid ground.”

Praying like the Psalms is an *invitation to honesty*.

One that absolutely insists that *God is*.

And one that builds a little spiritual muscle at every strain, while quietly *preparing us for the big lifting to come*.

The Psalms give me a good image. A pattern. A call for prayer.

Here’s our take home verse:

Ps. 62:8

“Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge.”

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The snares of death encompassed me, the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD; "O LORD, I beg you, save my life!" ... For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I walk before the LORD in the land of the living...

What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me? *I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD... O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving...* (Psalm 116:3-4, 8-9, 12-13, 16-17)