

Praying with the Psalms

Leaders Guide



*But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Psalm 1:2

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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.

Psalms

Praying with the Psalms

Introduction Part II

STUDYING THE PSALMS

The goal of this study is to learn how to read the Psalms to enrich and inform your own prayers. It will be much easier to pray a psalm after you've first studied it. If you don't understand it, you will find it hard to meditate or pray it.

Here is a format for studying a psalm on your own:

1. Read the psalm through a couple of times.
2. Decide the *main theme* in a single phrase or sentence.
2. *Outline* it, summarizing each section in a paraphrased sentence, relating its content to the theme.
4. When done, you may wish to give a *title* to it and revise the *theme*.
5. Write down how to pray this psalm in light of *Christ*, seeing Christ praying it and/or praying it to him.
6. Write *meditation thoughts*: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

PSALM 4 AS AN EXAMPLE

Read Psalm 4 as a group and consider this analysis.

Psalm 4: Unconditional Joy

Theme: How to have joy and delight apart from circumstances.

Outline

Verse 1. The Source of my joy: "My righteous God." He is righteous and yet he is *my* God — he is for me! He is a God of love *and* righteousness.

Verses 2-3. Application #1 to *divided* hearts. The first reason we don't have joy and delight in all circumstances is because we have divided hearts. Get rid of idols! You are chosen by grace for *intimacy* ("himself"). You can't serve God and idols — that is why you don't have intimacy. Without intimacy with God, you can't live a stable life.

Verses 4-5. Application #2 to *bitter* hearts. The second reason we don't have joy and delight in all circumstances is because we often are bitter and resentful. Get rid of anger! How? You should live in *humility* ("search your hearts"). Trust him (v. 5); don't think you know best. Humble yourself.

Verses 6-7. Application #3 to suffering hearts. If we have worked on intimacy and humility, then in suffering we will have the light of God's "face" (v. 6b) and it will get us through.

With Christ

Verse 1 refers both to God's upholding of justice in general and his commitment to me. How could he be both for justice *and* for me? Only through Jesus Christ! Because of Jesus' life and death, God can be "both just and Justifier of those who believe." Only in Jesus Christ can he truly be "my righteous God" (both "righteous" yet "my"). Only praying verse 1 in Christ will make the rest of the psalm active. When I see what Christ has done, only then can I be sure God will always answer me (v. 1). Only then can I truly love him instead of idols and humble myself so I am not always angry. Only then can I truly know he is working in my suffering, as he worked in Christ's. **Addendum:** I know God will answer me when I call (v. 1) because one terrible day, he did not answer Jesus when he called out, "My God" (Matt. 27:46).

Praying It

Adoration: (1) That God is a righteous God. (2) That he is "my" God — a personal God who is for me. (3) That in Christ he can be both.

Confession: (1) I tend to get angry in bed, not humbler! I tend to think about my troubles and get resentful that my life isn't going well. Forgive me. (2) Forgive me my idols.

Thanksgiving: (1) Thank you that you have not held my petty resentments toward you against me. (2) Thank you that in Jesus Christ, you answer me, because one day you didn't answer him. (3) Thank you that in Jesus Christ's suffering, I see an example of how you can work through pain and trouble.

Supplication: (1) Help me to sleep (v. 8)! Let these truths really affect my heart so I have your peace. (2) Let me see the light of your face (v. 6). I know so little of that.

GROUP EXERCISE: READ PSALMS 133 AND 134

PSALM 133: The Unity of Believers

1. What is the main theme?

Theme: The unity between believers.

2. Outline

Verse 1. How deep is it? Unity is family level. Believers are “brothers,” not just an association. This level is both “good” (fitting reality) and “pleasant” (pleasurable, fitting our hearts).

Verse 2. How can it be gotten? Unity is a gift from above, not an achievement. It comes “down,” coming on us from above. Thus it can only be maintained, not attained (see Eph. 4:3).

Verse 3. How do we maintain it? Unity arises from being “set apart.” Oil was used to consecrate a priest; it was a very expensive (“precious” or “good”) honor. It depicts both (1) being accepted by costly grace (becoming fragrant to cover odor) and (2) being set apart to live for God above all (becoming empowered, healed, and strengthened). The experience of costly grace and commitment to service create unity. It is a by-product blessing; it can’t be achieved directly.

Verse 4. Why does it unify? Unity is a product of grace. Both great (Mount Hermon) and small (Zion hill) get the same blessing equally. This unites everyone, for “there” — in little Zion — we are blessed. Not on the peaks of achievement, but in the place where God chose by grace to bestow eternal life forevermore.

With Christ**3. What light is shed when I imagine Christ praying this psalm in any of its parts?****4. How can we pray this psalm to Christ in any of its parts?**

Aaron’s fragrance and holiness before God is only a dim picture of the Great High Priest, whose blessing now comes upon us all. He is not ashamed to call us “brothers” (Heb. 2:11-12); he is the true elder brother, who lost his fragrance and became a stench that we could be accepted. His priesthood is the basis for our priesthood and our unity with one another.

Praying It

Adorations: An anointing God who (1) accepts us and (2) empowers us. A gracious God who bestows blessing on a hill anyone can reach, not on high peaks.

Confessions: My fears of being “stinky” to Christian brethren rather than fragrant make it hard to be vulnerable.

Aspirations/Supplications: Enjoyment of one another. Deep unity that the world finds fragrant and beautiful. The “dew” — the joy, honor, and delight of love and the highest achievements coming upon us because of the knowledge of our gracious salvation.

PSALM 134: GOD BLESSES FROM ZION (linked to Psalm 133)

1. What is the main theme?

Theme: Where to get God’s blessing.

2. Outline

Verse 1. The Levitical singers were to stand day and night (in shifts) before the Lord, ever thanking and praising him (1 Chron. 23:26, 30).

Verse 2. They were to face the Holy of Holies, the seat or face of God, and praise the Lord.

Verse 3. In verses 1-2, we are blessing God — honoring and serving him. Now God blesses us — honoring us and serving us! “To bless God is to acknowledge... what He is; but to bless man, God must make of him what he is not.”¹

Verse 3. God blesses from Zion. Zion is a place you can go — neither a high mountain to climb nor an uncharted mountain to discover. Thus his blessing is “very near you” (Deut. 30:11-14; Rom. 10:6-9). In Christ, you can even go to Zion without moving your legs at all.

With Christ**3. What light is shed when I imagine Christ praying this psalm in any of its parts?**

4. How can we pray this psalm to Christ in any of its parts?

Through him, we come to the true Mount Zion (Heb. 12:22-24). This is the true way of access to his presence. In verse 24 his spilled blood cries out for a fulfilled justice, that is, grace. In verse 23 our names are written in heaven (Luke 10). It is in Christ on the cross that the almighty yet accessible God can bless us, for there his truth and love were both satisfied. If it were not for Christ, we couldn't praise God at all. We would only be afraid of his wrath.

Praying It

Adorations: Almighty God (Maker of heaven and Earth), yet accessible God (who blesses you from Zion).

Confessions: Despite accessibility of blessing, I am not relentless enough in praise to find it.

Aspiration/Supplications: Service to God; regular praise before his face where I "lift up hands before his holiness" and learn how to go to Zion through Christ (Heb. 12).

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 454.

Psalms

Meditation I

Study 1 | Psalm 1

INTRODUCTION

The word “meditate” is used often in the Psalms. One Hebrew word means literally to “mutter” or to “talk to oneself.” This refers to the fact that meditation entails both focused attention and personal application. The other word means to “muse” or “ponder.” In Psalm 77:12 and 143:5, we are called to meditate on the works of God in nature and history. In Psalm 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, and 148, we are exhorted to meditate on God’s Word, his verbal revelation. In Psalm 63:6, the psalmist simply meditates “on thee.” Clearly, many of the Psalms are themselves extended meditations. What is meditative prayer? Or what is the meditation that leads to deepening prayer?

PSALM 1

1. What can you learn about meditation from verse 2?

First, we see that the object or basis for meditation is “the law of the Lord,” the Word of God. There are many other things that people may and should meditate upon. But in Psalm 1, the primary concern is meditation on Scripture.

Second, we see that “delighting” in the law of the Lord is closely associated with meditation. If we are honest, we will admit that we do not usually think of the words “delight” and “law” in the same sentence. But this shows us at least two things about meditation. (a) Meditation involves *not just the head, but the heart*. “*Delight in the law*” is not simply intellectual study, but an internal relishing and cherishing of the truth. (b) Meditation involves *not just thinking but acting*. “*Delight in the law*” is not simply a matter of noticing truths and principles. You only “delight in the law” if you love having God tell you what to do! Meditation, then, means very hard thinking: “How does this apply to me? How does this change me? How does this affect me? How does it make me different?”

Third, we see in the phrase “day and night” the consistency and discipline of meditation. This is not just a spontaneous epiphany that happens to us. It is something we decide to do. It must happen regularly, relentlessly. It is something you do whether you feel like it or not.

Note: In his study of Psalm 1, Eugene Peterson brings out the fact that the original meaning of the Hebrew word used here for “law” — *torah* — comes from a verb that means “to throw something to hit its mark, as in a javelin.”¹ That is highly significant. The Scriptures are not words we simply study as if for an exam, unlocking information to use as we will. These are energies hurled at our heart. God’s words are designed to penetrate, wound, remove, heal, and infuse us. In the New Testament we read that the Word of God is “alive and

active... a sword" (Heb. 4:12). This is quite important practically. This realization is necessary for meditation: that his word is *torah*, living truth aimed to penetrate. Sometimes that very thought spontaneously moves us into meditation and prayer.

2. What is meditation contrasted with in verse 1? What does that teach you about meditation? (Hint: what is the significance of the progression from "walk" to "stand" to "sit"?)

The first thing this contrast teaches us is that meditation leads to blessedness! There are so many contrasting clauses in this first sentence (which stretches across the first two verses) that we often miss the point. If we look only at its beginning and end, it becomes clear: "Blessed is the man who... meditates day and night." Once we remove all the contrasts and the qualifiers, we see the point: If you want "blessedness," you must meditate. The word "blessed" in Hebrew means far more than just "happy." It refers to complete peace and fullness of life, total well-being — an enormous promise.

Second, we learn what we could see implicitly before: that meditation is not just an intellectual exercise, but the basis for our whole way of life. The life of a godly man in verse 2, based on meditation on God's law, is contrasted with the life of the ungodly man in verse 1. Notice, however, that even an *ungodly* life is also based on some form of "meditation." It begins with "walking in the counsel of the ungodly." "Counsel" refers to a form of wisdom and thinking. We will either be meditating and walking in God's wisdom or meditating and walking in worldly, human wisdom. What shapes your thinking ("counsel") shapes your behavior ("way") and your attitude and heart ("scoffers").

Thus we must always consider what we are listening to and meditating on in our heart of hearts. We will naturally meditate on the "counsel of the wicked" or we will deliberately make ourselves meditate on the law of the Lord. There are no other alternatives.

In summary: in verses 1-2, our blessedness or lack thereof depends on what we are meditating on in our heart of hearts.

3. How are verses 3-5 an example of meditation? (a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness. (b) How is a tree like a meditating person? (c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?

One of the most fascinating things about this psalm is the way it actually does a meditation *on* meditation.

(a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness.

Verses 3 through 5 are an extended consideration of the contrast between the ungodly life and the godly life, much like “chaff” contrasts with a tree. [Some of us urbanites need to recall that chaff is the seed covering, husk, and other debris that separate from the more valuable grain during threshing. In ancient times, the grain and the chaff were thrown into the air together, allowing the wind to blow away the useless — and lighter — chaff, leaving the heavier grain to fall back to earth to be gathered for planting or food.] What does this metaphor-contrast tell us? (1) A tree is useful but chaff is useless, so ungodliness is of no profit. (2) A tree is stable and lasting, while chaff is blown about and blown away. So ungodliness leads to instability and all its gains are temporary. (3) A tree bears fruit; thus it gives life to people and grows more trees. Chaff cannot bring forth any new life. Nor can it feed anyone; it has no nutritional value. So godliness matures, nurtures, and bears life, while ungodliness leaves you empty, hungry, unsatisfied, and starving.

(b) How is a tree like a meditating person?

Verse 3 begins, “he is like.” Who is “he”? The man who meditates on the law day and night (v. 2). Therefore, the tree in verse 3 is an extended meditation on the one who meditates. What do we learn? Ironically, as soon as we begin to answer the question, we are beginning to meditate!

- (1) Meditation takes time, like a tree putting roots down. Trees don’t grow overnight!
- (2) Meditation leads to depth and stability. The deeper one’s “roots” in meditation, the less likely that a windstorm will blow you over.
- (3) Meditation is looking at the Word of God like a thirsty tree looks at water. This shows us that meditation goes beyond the intellectual. It is a spiritual “tasting” of Scripture, delighting in it, sensing the sweetness, thanking God and praising God for what you see. It is also spiritually “digesting” Scripture, applying it, thinking about how it affects you, describes you, and guides you in the most practical way. Meditation also helps you draw strength from Scripture, letting it give you hope, using it to remember how loved you are.

(4) Meditation will always lead to character growth — to fruit. It is not just a way to feel close to God. Real meditation changes the heart permanently into a heart of love, joy, peace, patience, humility, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). As Derek Kidner observes, “The tree is no mere channel, piping the water unchanged from one place to another, but a living organism which absorbs it, to produce in due course something new and delightful, proper to its kind and to its time.”²

(5) Meditation leads to stability, but not immunity from suffering and dryness. This tree only bears fruit “in season,” though “its leaf does not wither.” This means that meditation will lead to stability. A meditating person is an evergreen! Yet we must not always expect meditation to lead to uniform experiences of joy and love. There are “seasons” for great delight (springtime blossoms?) and for wisdom and maturity (summer fruit?). It means there are also spiritual winter times, when we don’t feel God close, though our roots may still be firmly in his truth. “The promised immunity of the *leaf* from withering is not independence from the rhythm of the seasons... but freedom from the crippling damage of drought.”³ Only in light of the balance of this metaphor can we understand the last line of verse 3. When the psalmist says, “Whatever he does prospers,” he does not mean that “he reaches every goal” or “he is always successful.” Rather, it means something like this: “A meditating person will always grow. Sometimes it is growth internally through suffering (as in winter) and sometimes it is externally through success (as in springtime). But you will always grow and prosper!”

(c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?

Meditation has a lot to do with the imagination. You are trying to grasp how truth really *affects* you. There is no better way than to create an image in your mind, for an image helps you make an abstract truth more concrete to your understanding and more gripping to your heart. Someone once defined meditation as “the mind descending into the heart.”

4. What do verses 5-6 promise? How does this result from a life of meditation?

Verse 5 gives us the chilling interpretation of the “chaff” metaphor. Just as the chaff is blown away into oblivion by the wind, so the wicked will be blown away by the presence of God on judgment day. By inference, we are being told that the one who meditates on the law of the Lord can be confident of “standing” on that day. Verse 6 tells us that the Lord “watches over” us, a word that means he comes close and cares for us. We will not have to be afraid of what will happen when we stand before God. We can have assurance that we will stand in the judgment.

How can a life of meditation lead to this kind of confidence and assurance? We who read Psalm 1 in the light of Jesus Christ have a ready answer. Without Jesus and the cross, it is frightening to meditate on “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (v. 6). Who in the world is righteous enough for God? Without the assurance of Jesus’ death for me and his righteousness imputed to me (2 Cor. 5:21), I will *lose* confidence the more I meditate on Psalm 1 and the righteousness of God on judgment day. But if I meditate on what Jesus has done for me, I truly will find my assurance growing. Richard Lovelace comments:

“It is an item of faith that we are children of God; there is plenty of experience in us against it.” The faith that surmounts this evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness... “We are not saved by the love we exercise, but by the love we trust.”⁴

When Lovelace speaks of “warming oneself at the fire of God’s love,” he is describing what it means to meditate on the righteousness we have in Christ by his sacrificial death. If we don’t meditate on that until our hearts are hot with assurance, we will “steal love and self-acceptance” from worldly achievements, beauty, and status. That is why there are only two paths! We either walk in the counsel of the world, getting our warmth there and walking in accordance with it (v. 1), or we delight in what the Word tells us about our salvation. If we do verse 3, we will have the confidence of verses 5-6.

In summary, meditation on Scripture is pondering, relishing, imagining, applying, and rehearsing God’s truth until it becomes real to your heart and permanently affects your attitude and behavior. It leads to blessedness (v. 1), stability and the ability to grow in all circumstances (vv. 3-4), freedom and independence from the world’s ways (vv. 1-2), and confidence and assurance in our relationship to God (vv. 5-6).

5. Unlike most of the Psalms, Psalm 1 is not itself a prayer. It is a meditation on meditation. Why do you think it was chosen to introduce the prayers of the Psalms?

The Psalms were collected and arranged at a certain point in Israel’s history, so this psalm’s first place is not an accident. It stands as the doorway into the Psalter, the prayer book of the Bible, and its subject is the doorway into *real* prayer. It *is* not itself a prayer. It is what it talks about — a meditation. Now, if the first psalm is about meditation, it is a strong indication that meditation is the necessary preparation for deeper prayer.

This is an important discovery. Most of us have a devotional life in which we jump from a fairly academic study of the Bible into prayer. But there is a kind of middle ground between prayer and Bible study; a kind of overlap or bridge between the two. After studying a passage, we need to learn to meditate our hearts hot and yet quiet on the truth of God. That is a doorway into deeper prayer.

6. List any ways that (a) Jesus Christ sheds light on Psalm 1, and (b) Psalm 1 sheds light on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

(a) On the one hand, Jesus was pre-eminently a person who delighted in the Word and meditated on it day and night. He is the One who meditated so profoundly on Scripture that he virtually “bled” Scripture, quoting it in the most extreme moments of his life (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). That is how he stood firm — how he was truly a tree “evergreen” — using the Word of God even when in hell (on the cross). Do you want to put up even with hell? Put your roots into Scripture!

(b) Jesus is also supremely the One on whom we meditate. Why is his life, especially as depicted in the Gospels, such rewarding fuel for our meditations? Because he *is* the meditation of God! He is God’s truth become “real,” made concrete and applied. As we saw above, *he* is the One who enables us to stand on judgment day. *He* is the One who puts in us the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). We must meditate on him and with him. Then, not only will Psalm 1 come to life in new ways, but we will become unshakable trees, as he was.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 25.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 48.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 48.

⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, quoting P. T. Forsyth in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 213.

Psalms

Meditation II

Study 2 | Psalm 2

PSALM 2

1. Compare Psalm 2:1-3 with Psalm 1:1-3. How would you characterize the differences in subject matter and orientation?

The nouns of Psalm 1 are individual (“the man,” “he”) while the nouns of Psalm 2 are corporate (“the nations,” “the peoples,” “the kings,” “the rulers”). The verbs of Psalm 1 are quiet and personal (“walk” “delight” “meditate”) while the verbs of Psalm 2 are violent and political (“conspire,” “plot,” “take their stand,” “break their chains”).

The difference could not be greater! While the orientation of Psalm 1 is very personal and inward, the orientation of Psalm 2 is frankly political and outward. Psalm 1 is looking at the internal, invisible landscape of the heart and the will, while Psalm 2 is looking at the external, visible social landscape of kings and nations. Wisdom, then, is to have fierce delight in the kingdom of God. This is as corporate a psalm (emphasizing a commitment to the spread of the kingdom of God) as Psalm 1 is individual (emphasizing personal devotion).

2. Ironically, the words “meditate” in Psalm 1:2 and “plot” in Psalm 2:1 are the very same word in Hebrew. How is the use of the word the same in both psalms? How is it different?

We said earlier that “meditation” refers what your heart of hearts does to any foundational principle or idea. For example, if you believe that you aren’t worth anything unless you make a lot of money, your heart takes hold of that and does a lot of dreaming and applying of that “truth” to your emotions and actions. Your heart compares your financial status with others’; it envies people with a lot of money; it worries about what will happen if this deal doesn’t come through; it fantasizes about what you will be able to do and buy if you get to the economic level you are pursuing. All of these — the envy, the worry, the dreaming, the comparing, the planning, the scheming — are forms of meditating on the central (false) premise about money.

Here we see that “the peoples” believe that obedience to God is a form of slavery. In verse 3, we see that, in general, the peoples of the world interpret the laws and claims of God to be a form of oppression. “Discontent... clarifies into the resolve of verse 3, a typically blind reaction to God’s easy yoke.”¹ (See Matthew 11:28-30.) This basic (false) premise about the nature of God and obedience is a foundational life-lie that becomes the basis for all kinds of “plotting” or meditation. This is a fascinating way to look at the worry, anger, fantasizing, and scheming that our minds and hearts so often do. Often they are based on a false belief or premise that our mind is, in a sense, “meditating” on.

3. In verses 4-6, what is God's attitude toward the supposed power of the nations? Why is the belief of verse 3 so laughable? (See the reasons in verse 1.) Why do we need that perspective when we pray?

God finds the bluster and vaunted power of worldly elites and nations funny. He laughs at them. Eugene Peterson says that we need to have the same perspective,² especially when we watch the evening news. So many things that are considered matters of importance, glory, and weightiness are silly and will come to nothing. As one hymn puts it, "Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all its boasted pomp and show. Solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know."³

Why is the belief so laughable? The people who run the world don't see the Word of God as truth that roots and heals (Ps. 1) but rather as a chain that enslaves us (2:3). But to think of God's rule as slavery is irrational: it posits more wisdom to us than we have and engages in a character assassination of God. Notice that verse 1 is a question without an answer. It asks, "*Why* do all the nations spend their time plotting to live lives independent of God's law and devise glory independent of his glory?" No answer is given because it is a rhetorical question, an expression of amazement. It is like saying to someone who is doing something self-destructive and foolish, "*Why* are you killing yourself like this?" That is not a real request for information. It is a statement of astonishment and an appeal to the person to see how ridiculous and crazy he or she is.

Why do we need this perspective when we pray? Eugene Peterson thinks that the purpose of this psalm is to get us to "pray [through] our intimidation."⁴ We need a very positive, confident attitude toward the world when we pray. We should not feel that the darkness, injustice, and foolishness of the world will prevail. God is in control. Then we will pray in confidence. God laughs at the world's rebellion. That is an assurance to us (not sadistic of him!). We need to see that there is no chance of his kingdom losing. Intimidation by the world (Psalm 2) is as fatal to prayer as an attraction to it (Psalm 1)!

There is a second way the perspective of this psalm helps us. When we feel that God's rule over us is bondage, it is the remnant of the world's mindset in us. Sometimes we have to remind ourselves that this natural sinful attitude is idiotic and laughable.

4. In verses 6-7, what is God's answer to the world's evil and injustice? What do we learn about this "King" in verses 6-12?

"You are my Son" is God's answer to the world's evil and injustice. "This... is the centerpiece, the answer awaited in verses 1-5 and expounded in 8-12. The / is emphatic; the opening is best translated "But as for me, I have set..." After the bombast of verse 3, this is the neglected voice that has the final say."⁵

God's answer to the world's rebellion is the "installation" of the Messianic king. This will be the ultimate way in which the rebellion of the world is revealed as foolishness and crushed to pieces.

What do we learn about this "King"? First, he is installed on "Zion" (v. 6), the hill inside Jerusalem where the temple was built. This teaches us two things: (a) Zion was a temple-hill, the place where sacrifices were offered to God. Thus, the Messiah showed the foolishness of the world's distrust of God when he died in love for us. (b) Zion was a little hill, not a majestic mountain. The Messiah did not come in a way the world expected. He did not come with pomp or the kind of power that impresses the world. (c) Zion was a "holy" or chosen hill. So the Messiah is all about grace.

Second, we learn that this Messiah will be the Son of God. The words "today I have become your Father" (v. 7) remind us that these Messianic prophecies have double meanings. Psalm 2 probably served as a coronation psalm. Whenever a new king of Israel was crowned, this psalm pointed to the ways in which he was a type of the coming Messiah, who would *truly* be the Son of God. On the day of coronation, the king is *declared* as Son and Servant, as Jesus was on the day of his baptism (Matt. 3:17).

Third, we see that this Messiah will not only be the king of Israel, but the King of all nations. This is a missionary mandate! When we preach the gospel, we are declaring that Jesus is already appointed Lord of every society. He is a Messiah for all the world.

In summary, it is pre-eminently in Christ that we see God's laughter at the rebellion of the world. God sets his Messiah on the throne, not just in spite of their rebellion but through it. Acts 4:24-31 shows that the people who thought they were destroying the Messiah only did "what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." By slaying Jesus, they destroyed their own power. Thus the cross is the ultimate example of how laughable it is to rebel against God. It is laughable because it can't do a whit against him and it will be used *by* him to establish grace (see Ps. 76:10). However, God is *not* laughing at the suffering our rebellion costs or the price it took to deal with it.

Note: By divine inspiration, the psalmist looks down the entire course of history. He sees Jesus standing at judgment day, meting out justice. There is little reference (except to the coronation site of "Zion") to the death of the Messiah and the offer of forgiveness through repentance and faith. Instead, the writer looks to the end of time and sees how puny the supposed power of the world rulers will look before his feet.

5. How does the beatitude in verse 12 contradict the mindset of verses 1-3?

Derek Kidner observes, “The final beatitude leaves no doubt of the grace that inspires the call of verses 10ff. What fear and pride interpret as bondage (v. 3) is in fact security and bliss. And there is no *refuge* from him: only *in him*.⁶

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 50.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), p. 31.

³ John Newton, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” 1779.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Psalms: Prayer of the Heart* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 13.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 51.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 53.

Psalms

Meditation III

Study 3 | Psalm 119, Part 1

PSALM 119

Introduction

We saw in Psalm 1 that meditation entails a full “delight in the law of the Lord.” To this, Psalm 119 gives the ultimate expression. It is by far the longest of the Psalms (or of any “chapter” in the Bible) — 176 verses. It is an acrostic psalm, with each stanza beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Because the themes of Psalm 119 are repeated throughout, we are studying three “ore samples” extracted from the whole. Within them we can find each of the precious metals that run throughout. The theme is the Word of God.

READ vv.1-16 (Aleph and Beth)

1. What do we learn about the Scriptures themselves — what are they? (List all the names and synonyms for Scripture, and meditate on what each one tells you about the nature of God’s Word.)

In this section, Scripture is given the following names:

- “law of the Lord” (v. 1)
- “statutes” (v. 2a)
- “his ways” (v. 3)
- “precepts” (v. 4)
- “decrees” (v. 5)
- “commands” (v. 6)
- “righteous laws” (v. 7)
- “your promise” (v. 11)
- “your word” (v. 9)

Law of the Lord. This means that all of Scripture is *normative*. It is the standard. It must be obeyed; it is not optional. The Bible does not “suggest.” This does not mean that every part of the Bible is in the *form* of a law. Some people might counter that when the psalmist speaks of “the law,” he must be speaking only of the Mosaic legislation, where rules for conduct are laid down. But in the New Testament, we have an example of Jesus quoting the Psalms and calling it “the law” (John 15:25). Why would the poetic Psalms be considered “the law”? Because they tell the servant of God how he or she must think, pray, and approach God. Every part of the Bible is binding on our conscience.

Statutes. This means that the Scriptures are *permanently relevant*, written down for all time and for every place. The English word “statutes” is closely related to the word “statue,” and therefore gets this Hebrew word and concept

across quite nicely. Just as a statue is essentially a permanent art form that lasts through the ages, so the Scriptures have a timeless relevance. They do not go out of date, nor are they written for only one culture and epoch. We can't say that "we cannot believe in this teaching anymore as modern people." What makes us think we have arrived at the ultimate point in time? If we use our current moment's viewpoint as a basis for rejecting part of Scripture, we stand on sinking sand, for our own time's viewpoint will soon be dated and a laughingstock. That is why God made his Word into "statutes." They sit in judgment on our current viewpoints, not vice versa.

His ways. This means that Scripture is an expression of God's own nature, heart, and attributes. A path through the woods shows the way people habitually travel through it. So your "ways" are your habitual patterns of thought and action — your settled character. This means that Scripture is not an arbitrary or abstract set of sayings and rules. It is a revelation of the very character of God — his holiness, his love, his wisdom, his glory. This is why we will see that, before it is anything else, Scripture is primarily a means of relationship with God.

Precepts. This means that the Scriptures are consummate *wisdom*, wise principles for living that perfectly fit our needs and condition. Kidner ¹ says that the Hebrew word behind the English word "precept" refers to the care of a shepherd over the sheep he "attends" to. For us today, the word connotes the detailed care of a physician or counselor. The word sounds much like our English word "prescription." The doctor will look into our situation carefully and prescribe exact amounts of particular medicines. In the same way, Scripture is the detailed instruction of our Great Physician or Shepherd, who knows our condition perfectly. So while "law" and "statutes" tell us that the Scriptures must be obeyed no matter how we feel, the word "precepts" shows us that Scripture is for our own good. It is exactly what we need to be healed and molded into the character and "ways" of God himself.

Decrees and commands. This means that the Scriptures are absolutely *authoritative*. Kidner writes that these words "emphasize the straight authority of what is said; not merely the power to convince or persuade, but the right to give orders." ² These words could be seen as virtually the same as "law" and "statutes." But Kidner is right in saying that these terms bring out the naked, direct authority of God's Word. Scripture does not have to be understood, it does not have to seem reasonable, it does not have to give explanations. But it *does* have to be followed.

Righteous laws. This means that the Scriptures are never guilty of injustice or unfairness. Sometimes translations render this term as "ordinances" or "judgments," but this is a good rendering. It tells us that Scripture not only fits our needs ("precepts") and God's character ("his ways," "commands"); it is also the supreme standard for justice among human beings. The expressions of Scripture are not only wise; they are just and merciful. There is nothing unfair about them; indeed, they *define* what is fair.

Your promise. Scripture is not only a covenant that binds us to obey God, it is a covenant in which God binds himself to love and provide for us. He does not only give us the righteous law, he also promises to fulfill that law for us and save us from our sin. [Note: Kidner³ tells us that this Hebrew word — *'imra* — can mean either “promise” or more generally “word.” Some translations render it “word” throughout Psalm 119 and others render it “promise.” But it is not the same word as the Hebrew term *dabar* — “word” in verse 16.]

Sometimes the entire Bible is referred to as “your promises,” or even as “your promise.” That is important to remember. In the final analysis, the Bible is not a book of righteous principles, but a story about how God bound himself to fulfill the law and save us, at infinite cost to himself. The person who makes a promise puts him- or herself in a position of vulnerability and responsibility. So the Bible is a history of God’s self-binding, so that we could be free.

Your word. This tells us about the *inspiration* and *truth* of the Bible. In some ways, this is the most general term. Commands and decrees from God and precepts and promises from God are all “words” from God. But it also reminds us that the Bible, though written by human beings, is not ultimately a human book. It is not really the word of Moses, or David, or Paul, but his Word. The fact that the psalmist considers the writings of human beings to be God’s Word is tremendously significant. It means that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whatever the human authors wrote was exactly what God wanted them to write. So the final product can be called “your word.” That means we cannot dismiss any part of the Bible as flawed; that would be to say that God was flawed or that God lacked wisdom. *All Scripture comes from God’s very mouth* (v. 13).

Summary

- “Your word” and “righteous laws” teach the *inspiration* and *infallibility-inerrancy* of the Bible. Whatever it asserts is true. It is not capable of error.
- “Decrees” and “commands” and “law” teach the supreme, binding *authority* of the Bible. Whatever it asserts must be followed, regardless of emotional state, popular custom, expert opinion.
- “Statutes” and “precepts” teach the *sufficiency* of the Bible. We don’t need to correct, modernize, or supplement the Bible. It gives us all we need for salvation and basic satisfaction and spiritual growth.
- “His ways” and “promise” teach the *message* and *purpose* of the Bible. God binds himself to save us. The purpose of the Bible is to tell us how God has done this and to show us how to know him personally.

2. How can what you learned about the nature of the Scripture (Question 1) change the way you regard it and use it in your own life?

This is an application question with far more possible answers than we can list here. But here are some typical ways contemporary Christians need to change in their attitude toward Scripture.

One way many modern Christians fail to practice Psalm 119's view of Scripture is that they read it as simply a "how-to" book of principles for living. They think of it as a manual for successful Christian living that operates like manuals on successful investing or successful computer programming. When we read the Bible like that, we forget that it is *not* mainly about what we have to do to reach happiness. Rather, it is about what God has done to save us and give us happiness. We have to believe, rejoice, and rest in what *he* has done before we can behave in a certain way. The Bible is not mainly about us, but mainly about him. It is *his* ways, and *his* promise. Many of our failures in life are mainly due to our efforts to save ourselves, and it is easy to co-opt even the Bible itself into that misguided enterprise. Instead, we have to drink deeply from Scripture's assurances and promises about what Christ has done for us.

Another way many fail to practice Psalm 119's view of Scripture is that they use the Bible as a source of right doctrine and right practice (which it is!), yet miss its importance as a way of knowing God personally. It reveals *his ways* and it is *his* personal *word* to us. As we read through Psalm 119, we come to see how differently the writer treats Scripture. He does not only study it, he uses it in prayer as a way to really encounter God. (More on that below.)

Another way many fail to practice Psalm 119's view of Scripture is that they pick and choose the parts that fit the prevailing cultural trends and thought-forms of the day but reject the rest. For example, much of what the Bible says about God's wrath, holiness, and judgment are very unappealing to the modern mind. But what the Bible has to say about mercy and forgiveness and love is very appealing. Many things it says about making peace fit the liberal mindset but not what it says about sexuality. Much of what it says about marriage and family fits the conservative mindset, but not what it says about the poor and a simple lifestyle. In many churches today, it is very typical for the average person to have a general respect for the Bible, but to believe that many parts of it are ridiculously primitive and out of date. They reject the idea of the Bible as "statutes."

Another way many fail to practice Psalm 119's view of Scripture is to use the Bible as a "blessing box." (This is in contrast to those who use the Bible as a book of rules and principles rather than a way to understand God's work and have the Spirit apply it to their hearts.) These people read the Bible mainly for inspiration, but they also need a systematic study of the Word so that it can search their hearts. They not only need its encouragements, they need to bring themselves into conformity with God's ways.

3. What do we learn about what we should do with Scripture in order to benefit from it? (List the different terms and reflect on what they tell you about what you should be doing with the Scriptures.)

In this section, we are shown the following ways of using Scripture:

- “walk according” (v. 1) and “in” (v. 3)
- “keep” it and “seek him” (v. 2)
- “fully obey” it (v. 4)
- “consider” it (v. 5)
- “learn” (v. 7)
- “living according” (v. 9)
- “seek you... not stray” (v. 10)
- “hide” it in the “heart” (v. 11)
- receive God’s “teaching” of it (v. 12)
- “recount verbally” (v. 13)
- “Rejoice... as in riches” (v. 14)
- “meditate” (v. 15)
- “delight... not neglect” (v. 16)

Learn and recount. The most basic thing we have to do with the Bible is to learn what is in it, as we would study any other book we needed to master. The psalmist says he will “learn your righteous laws” (v. 7) and then will “with my lips... recount *all* the laws” (v. 13). This means simply that we must get to know the content of Scripture in as much detail as we can. This takes simple discipline. We get a glimpse of it in verse 13, where the psalmist is either using memorization as a means of mastering and retaining what he has read, or is in dialogue with another student. Reading, study, memorization, and group learning are all ways to master the Bible’s content.

Receive the Lord’s teaching. In other ways we cannot treat the Bible like any other book. It is obvious that a student of the Bible will rely on human teachers and commentaries. But the psalmist begs for the *Lord’s* teaching (v. 12). We must rely on the Holy Spirit directly and consciously every time we read Scripture.

Consider and meditate. This goes beyond simple study, as we saw in our study of Psalm 1. The phrase “consider your commands” cannot mean that the psalmist is “considering” whether or not to obey them! (The other terms he

uses for Scripture show that he does not consider disobedience an option.) It must mean that he is pondering *how* to obey the commands. The commands of God require reflection if we are to learn how to honor them and apply them to our lives.

Rejoice... as in riches and delight in your decrees. This can be understood either as a later stage in meditation, or as its fruit. The word "rejoice" is a Hebrew word of exultant festiveness. It describes the victorious laughter and shouts at a feast celebrating an enormous triumph. The psalmist gives us a vivid image when he says, "Rejoice... as in great riches." This tells us that when we come to understand Scripture properly as filled with gospel promises (see above), we will see it as brimming with "riches" for us. We gain assurance about what we have in Christ, how God sees us, what he has in store for us, and so on. In addition, this tells that we can "count up" these assurances and privileges the way we count up treasure. Think of how you rejoice in great riches — you do an accounting! You look at the numbers in all their different forms — real estate, trusts, art objects, land, and cash. The more we look at the numbers, the more secure we feel. As we read Scripture, we are to meditate on our riches until they bring enormous, festive joy. (Notice how often Scripture is likened to treasure in verses 72, 111, 127, and 162.)

Seek him... seek you... praise you. Verses 2 and 10 have important parallel clauses showing that the psalmist's purpose in Bible study is personal fellowship with God and the experience of God's presence. This is clearest in verse 10: he doesn't want to stray from God's commands because he is seeking *him*. In verse 7, he says that learning righteous laws leads him to "praise." Bible study must consist in — or result in — personal worship and fellowship with God.

Walk according, keep, and fully obey. The Scriptures are meant to be applied very practically to the way we live. Deuteronomy 29:29 essentially says that nothing is revealed in the Bible simply to be *known*. It is all to be obeyed and lived out.

Hidden . . . in my heart. This is the most comprehensive statement about what we do with Scripture. To "hide" has the connotation of "storing up," which encompasses reading, memorizing, learning, and meditating. But to hide "in the heart" encompasses the obedience, fellowship, and rejoicing that completely changes us. We are to be "Scripture-saturated" people. The image of "hiding in the heart" means that when we are cut, we should bleed Scripture. Jesus was the pre-eminent example. In his darkest moments, he quoted Scripture. When he was forsaken (Matt. 26:31), betrayed (Matt. 26:53-56), and killed (Matt. 27:46), he quoted Scripture. His heart and mind were so infused with Scripture that it simply erupted whenever he was in need or difficulty. That is why the effect of "hiding the word" in our hearts is "that I might not sin against you." Compare Colossians 3:16 for a New Testament version of the same concept.

Summary. We must (1) consciously depend on the Holy Spirit, to (2) first study, memorize, and analyze Scripture, then to (3) meditate on it until (4) we take deep delight in our privileges and (5) experience his presence, so that we can (6) obey and live out Scripture fully, (7) because of a permanent change in our heart's character.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 418.

¹ Derek Kidner, p. 418.

¹ Derek Kidner, p. 419.

Psalms

Meditation IV

Study 4 | Psalm 119, Part 2

PSALM 119

Introduction

We saw in Psalm 1 that meditation entails a full “delight in the law of the Lord.” To this, Psalm 119 gives the ultimate expression. It is by far the longest of the Psalms (or of any “chapter” in the Bible) — 176 verses. It is an acrostic psalm, with each stanza beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Because the themes of Psalm 119 are repeated throughout, we are studying three “ore samples” extracted from the whole. Within them we can find each of the precious metals that run throughout. The theme is the Word of God.

READ verses 25-48 (Daleth, He, Waw)

1. What additional ideas do you get from this section about what we should do with Scripture in order to benefit from it?

In this section, we are shown the following ways of using Scripture:

- “Recount my ways” (v. 26)
- “Chosen the way of truth” (v. 30)
- “Set my heart on your laws” (v. 30)
- “Run in the path” (v. 32)
- “Turn my eyes... my heart toward” (vv. 36-37)
- “Long for” (v. 40)
- “Sought out” (v. 45)
- “Speak of your statutes” (v. 46)
- “Love them” (v. 47)
- “Lift up my hands to your statutes” (v. 48)

Recount my ways. In verse 26 the psalmist associates “recounting my ways” with learning God’s decrees. Why? He seems to mean that self-examination is a necessary part of Bible study. We tend to think of this as prayer rather than Bible study, but the psalmist does not separate these two things as much as we do. We must do detailed self-inventory as we study his Word.

Chosen... set my heart. In verse 30 we have a strong statement of the place of the will in Bible study. We can't truly understand Scripture unless we make a basic commitment that "whatever I find in your Word, I will do." This has to be promised before we encounter the many difficult and specific prescriptions of Scripture. We need to settle its authority in our hearts first.

Turn my eyes... turn my heart toward. These prayers in verses 36-37 are a more specific way to ask for the Holy Spirit's help in Bible study. They admit that we have an inner blindness and an inner orientation away from God's truth. The word translated "worthless things" in verse 37 can also be translated "idols." One example of an idol is wealth (v. 36). The psalmist knows that his idols make it hard to read Scripture. We filter out the things we just don't want to hear. We don't even allow ourselves to notice them when we read them, so deep are our prejudices. Thus, when we pray for the Holy Spirit's help, we should not only pray for intellectual illumination, but for personal honesty.

Run in the path. Verse 32 uses a vivid illustration of eagerness. When we see the "path" or pattern marked out for us by the Word, we are not to reluctantly shuffle down it, but willingly and eagerly follow it with all our might.

Long for and love them. When verse 40 says that the psalmist "longs for" God's precepts, it introduces a new aspect of our relationship with the Bible. This is not the same as to "rejoice." This communicates a sense of hunger or thirst, and shows us that the Bible is not only the source of joy, but of strength (see below).

Sought out. In verse 45 this term is similar to "learning" and "recounting." It means that the Bible is to be scoured for truth. We are to analyze and read it thoroughly, seeking out new teachings all the time.

Speak of your statutes. This means (v. 46) that we are not only to teach and articulate the truth of Scripture, we are to be willing to do so in places that might be intimidating ("before kings"). A simple rule of educational psychology is that we learn something much better when try to teach it to others. For example, the person preparing to lead the Bible study will learn far more than any other participant.

Lift up my hands to your statutes. This phrase in verse 48 is remarkable. To "lift one's hands to" is ordinarily a term for worship! It is an extremely bold statement of how deeply we must respect and yearn for the revelation of God in the Word. It means we are to experience absolute awe in our study of the Scriptures. (Compare verse 27: "then I will meditate on your wonders.")

2. Summarize what you have learned from these verses about how to approach the Bible. Practically, what should you do differently in your personal relationship to God's Word?

We have learned that we must:

Preliminary

1. Do self-examination and watch for personal idols. ("Teach me," "learn," "turn my heart")
2. Settle the issue of authority ("chosen the way of truth")

Basics

1. Study it systematically ("sought them out," "learn")
2. Memorize it ("recount all," "hide in my heart")
3. Meditate on it
 - a. Meditate in the sense of intellectually ponder ("consider," "meditate") the practical application of the text.
 - b. Meditate in the sense of delighting in, cherishing, and resting deeply in the privileges and assurances of the text. ("rejoice as in treasure")
 - c. Meditate in the sense of praising and worshiping God for what you discover about him in the text. ("praise," "lift up my hands")
4. Obey it
 - a. Eagerly ("run in the path")
 - b. Comprehensively ("obey it fully")
 - c. Openly ("speak of it to kings")

Practically, what would you do differently in your personal relationship to God's Word? Think about the areas above — preliminary attitudes and commitments, study and memorization, meditation, and application. Which area are you weakest in? What could you do to improve?

READ verses 121-136 (Ayin, Pe)**3. Look not only at these verses but at verses 25-48. What do they teach us about what God can do in our lives through the Scriptures? (I.e., what are the benefits?) List the different terms and reflect on what they tell you about the benefits of Scripture.**

In these sections, we are shown that God does the following things in our lives through the Word:

- “preserve my life... [when] I am laid low” (v. 25)
- “strengthen me” (v. 28)
- “keep me from deceitful ways” (v. 29)
- “be gracious to me” (v. 30)
- “you have set my heart free” (v. 32)
- “that you may be feared” (v. 38)
- “take away the disgrace” (v. 39)
- “answer the one who taunts” (v. 42)
- “deal with me according to your covenant love” (vv. 41, 124)
- “discernment” (v. 124)
- “hate every wrong path” (v. 128)
- “unfolding... light” (v. 130)
- “gives understanding” (v. 130)
- “no sin rules over me” (v. 133)
- “God’s face shines” (v. 135)

Preserve my life and strengthen me. The first benefit of Scripture is endurance. Through the promises (which lift the heart) and the commands (which give direction), the Bible can keep a person going when he or she is “laid in the dust” and ready to give up. Thus the Bible really is spiritual food. It leads to strength and stability.

Keep me from deceitful ways. The second benefit of Scripture is self-discovery and self-understanding. It keeps us from being deceived as well as from being deceivers. This is one of several paradoxes we see here. It requires self-examination and self-awareness to study the Bible; then God, *through* the Bible, provides great self-awareness and self-discovery in return.

Be gracious to me through your law. The third benefit of Scripture is the experience and discovery of grace. This seems to be another paradox. How can God be gracious through his *law*? Doesn't the law demand justice, not grace and mercy? But Kidner writes, "It is a happy reminder that God's law is a good gift and is only the antithesis of grace when it is used to try to earn salvation." ¹ Only Jesus Christ could reveal how grace could come to us through law. It could only happen when One who was perfectly righteous fulfilled the law (Matt. 3:15) so God could be both just and gracious to us (Rom. 3:26).

Freedom. The fourth benefit of the Scriptures is freedom, but again there is a paradox. Verse 32 says essentially, "I obey because you have set my heart free." Yet verse 45 says, "I am free because I obey." Both, of course, are true. Thus the psalm tells us one of the main things that the modern world cannot understand, with its belief that freedom equals individual autonomy. As Kidner observes, "The paradox [is] that where God is master, 'service is perfect freedom.'" ² There are two aspects of this freedom.

First, there is the freedom of having no sin "rule over me" (v. 133). Though we will always have sin within us, we will find increasingly that no one behavior pattern or habit keeps us enslaved. Second, there is the freedom of "the mind-stretching encounter with a greater wisdom and vision than one's own... Verse 45 [literally] means 'at large'... but in verse 32 it recalls the 'largeness of mind' which Solomon was given. Moffatt's paraphrase of the verse is... 'I will obey thee eagerly, as thou dost open up my life.'" ³

Fear. The fifth benefit of the Scriptures is wonder and awe. Verse 38 ("Fulfill your promise to your servant, that you may be feared") and Psalm 130:4 each seem to state self-contradictory truths. Why would we be afraid of someone who has just fulfilled a promise? (Psalm 130:4 says, "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.") This shows that we do not have a good grasp of the biblical concept of the "fear of God." The fear of God is awe and wonder before the greatness of all that God is. Therefore, we are to study in great awe (v. 120) and wonder (v. 27). The fear of God certainly is not a superficial happiness, but it is deeply joyful, as wonder and excitement always are.

Away with disgrace. The sixth benefit of Scripture is confidence. Notice how the study of Scripture does away with shame (v. 31) and disgrace (v. 39) and gives us confidence to speak to our accusers (v. 42). This boldness is really the result of many other benefits. The experience of grace, the delight in assurances, and the clarity of God's laws all will come together to give us confidence. Grace and assurance undermine our need for approval. Law and wisdom give us views and beliefs we can be sure of since they are not simply our opinion. If we have done anything in the past that we would ordinarily be ashamed of all our lives, the gospel in the Word lays it to rest.

Unfolding, discernment, and understanding. The seventh benefit of Scripture is wisdom. Even “the simple” — uneducated or un-brilliant persons — can be far wiser in their views than the brilliant, because they build on the infinite wisdom of divine revelation. The word “unfold” is very interesting, reminding us that the Scriptures have infinite depths to those who are patient enough to plumb them.

Unfailing love and God’s face shines. The eighth benefit of Scripture is the personal experience of the love of God. All through the psalm (remember verses 2 and 4), we see that the psalmist pants after the Word, hungers for the Word, and seeks after the Word — only because he is panting, hungering, and seeking for the Lord himself. One translation renders 119:57 this way: “You are all I want, Lord, so I obey your precepts.” But verse 135 is most clear about what he wants. As he studies the Word, the psalmist wants the experience of the glory of God that Moses sought (Ex. 33). He wants God’s face to shine on him.

4. Some have complained that the psalmist is worshiping the Word rather than the Lord. He does seem to come close (see verses 48 and 120). How do we explain this from a Christian perspective (see John 1:1-3)?

The psalmist’s fierce devotion, almost worship, for Scripture is because he identifies the Word so closely with its author. If God is life, so is his Word. If God is perfect, so is his Word. If God is glorious, so is his Word.

But this devotion to God’s Word may also be due in part to the psalmist’s intuitive grasp of what we know explicitly. There *is* a Word who is the actual embodiment of the Father, whom we worship, love, pant after, and gaze on. It is Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

5. Share one thing that helped you from this study of Psalm 119.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 424.

² Derek Kidner, p. 421.

³ Derek Kidner. P. 421.

Psalms

Meditation V

Study 5 | Psalms 56 and 77

Introduction

We continue to study Psalms that teach us about meditation and prayer. Psalm 1 taught us that meditation is, in a sense, the “gateway” or foundation for deeper prayer. One of the reasons our prayer lives are so superficial is that we do not meditate as a preliminary to prayer. Psalm 119 taught us that the primary object of meditation is the revelation of God in Scripture. The following psalms have more to teach us about meditation and prayer. We will look at Psalms 56 and 77 and, next time, at Psalm 103.

PSALM 56

1. What situation is the psalmist facing?

From the psalm itself, we see that the author is being persecuted. Not only do people slander and attack his reputation and character (vv. 2, 5), they are conspiring to kill him (v. 6). The heading of the psalm gives us additional background. It says, “When the Philistines had seized him [David] in Gath.” This refers to an incident in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David was fleeing from the jealous wrath of Saul, the king of Israel. He could not trust anyone in Israel for fear that an informer would tell Saul of his whereabouts. In desperation he went to Gath (Goliath’s hometown!), hoping that the Philistine king there might take him in, now that he was an enemy of the king of Israel. Instead, he discovered that the king of Gath was hostile to him as well. Now he was doubly surrounded by enemies.

Out of this crisis came this psalm as well as Psalm 34.

2. What does David do in response to his fears and these dangers (vv. 4, 10)?

David’s response to fear is “I will trust in you” (v. 3). That is striking. Trust and faith are seen as acts of the will, not emotional or psychological conditions. According to Derek Kidner, “Faith is seen here as a deliberate act, in defiance of one’s emotional state. ...This striking verse [verse 4]... adds to the delineation of faith... by showing where faith rests, i.e. *in God*, and where it finds its content, i.e. in his word.”¹

But how do we put our trust in God? Fortunately, David twice connects his trusting-in-the-face-of fear with a particular discipline: “in God, whose word I praise...” (vv. 4 and 10). His ability to trust God in the face of fears is a function of “praising God’s word.” What does it mean to “praise God’s word”? It certainly means we are to meditate on it. You cannot praise something without

looking at it, numbering its beauties, reflecting on its benefits, and adoring it. It probably also means that we are to ponder God's promises and assurances, especially during times of fear and trouble.

In summary, we have this: David is not afraid of what men can do to him because he trusts in God. The functional way he trusts in God is by praising and meditating of God's Word, its promises, summonses, and truths.

Many people have noted the close similarity of David's words in 56:3-4 and 10-11 with Paul's more famous "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). (That is, "Who cares who is against us if God is for us?") Paul, however, ties this confident assurance directly to the death of Christ (Rom. 8:32). His reasoning is, "If (a) God gave us his Son, then (b) we know he is for us, and therefore (c) we fear no one else. What can mere mortals do to us?" David seems to know intuitively what we understand explicitly, but the Old Testament saints did not have the resources for confidence that we do.

PSALM 77

1. What situation is the psalmist facing?

This is not a psalm of David, but of Asaph, a figure biblical history tells us nothing about. The psalm itself does not offer many details about the particular situation Asaph is facing. But it is clear that he is in "distress" (v. 2); he is so upset that he cannot sleep at night (v. 4). He has the sense that he and his people have been "rejected" (v. 7), which means that Asaph has some unanswered need or prayer. Beyond that we do not know anything, except that this is a time of testing for Asaph.

2. What does the psalmist do in response to this trouble? (Compare the many synonym verbs that describe what he does.)

Again, as in Psalm 56, we see that the psalmist responds to threats and fears by meditation. "I will meditate" (v. 12) is his final answer to the distress of verses 1-2. There are several synonyms for meditation: he "remembers" (vv. 3, 11), he "thinks of the former days" (v. 5), his "heart mused and my spirit inquired" (v. 6), and he "meditates on" and "considers" all God's works and deeds.

The word “to muse” provides a helpful insight into the concept of meditation. One’s “muse” is one’s inspiration. Also, “muse” is the word from which we get our word “music.” When words are put to music, they go right to the heart. So “musing” is to take truth and to work it down into the heart until it affects the emotions. It is to take a truth we know and bring ourselves to feel it.

Another important synonym for meditation is “my spirit inquired” (v. 6). In large part, meditation consists of asking the right questions. To meditate is to ask myself questions about the truth, such as: “What difference does this make? Am I taking this seriously? If I forget this, how will that affect me? *Have I forgotten it?* Am I living in light of this?” It also means being willing to ask very uncomfortable, even radical questions, such as those in verse 5 and following: “What makes me think God will come through for me? How can I trust him?”

3. Assume that the psalm covers three stages of an effort to get soul strength through meditation. (a) What do we learn about meditation from verses 2-4? (b) What does the second effort in verses 5-12 teach us about meditation? (c) What do verses 13-20 teach us about meditation? How would Christians meditate on the “mighty deeds” of God (v. 12) differently today?

The psalm itself shows a remarkable progression. There are several stages here that show the progress of a real, concrete effort to do meditation in the midst of the realities of life.

Verses 2-4 represent the psalmist’s first effort to meditate. He tells us very candidly that his first effort to muse and meditate on God ended in failure. He prayed untiringly, yet his soul got no strength or comfort (v. 2). He “remembered” and reflected and meditated, but his spirit did not get stronger, only more “faint” (v. 3). His insomnia persisted (v. 4). What does this teach us? First, it teaches us that meditation is a true discipline. It is something we have control over and must learn to do through painstaking practice. It doesn’t just happen; we must do it. But second, it teaches us that meditation can be terribly difficult. It is something we will have to try repeatedly if it is going to give our souls the strength and comfort we need.

Verses 5-12 represent the psalmist’s second effort to meditate. This time he turns his mind to his own past, and he remembers other “songs in the night” (v. 6). This was probably a time when he experienced some darkness (“night”) but God brought him safely through. This memory of former times when God cared for him touches off a series of doubts that he expresses openly in verses 7-9. Verse 7 asks a perfectly valid question: Has God finally given up on me? He helped me in the past, but why should he help me now? Isn’t it possible that he will never show his favor to me again? Why should he come through for me?

By the time we get to verse 8, we find that his questions are sowing the seeds of their own answers. Suddenly, some contradictions within his doubts begin to become apparent. How can “unfailing love” (v. 8) fail?! Or how can God, if he is God, “forget” to be merciful (v. 9a)? Derek Kidner comments, “This is a clear example of the value of confessing one’s doubts to God. As the broad misgivings of verse 7 are spelt out more precisely in verses 8f. their inner contradictions come to light, and with them the possibility of an answer. ... *Steadfast love...* can hardly disappear, or *his promises* come to nothing... And to ask ‘*Has God forgotten?*’ is to invite only one reply.”²

In this second stage, we see that meditation is a willingness to “inquire” — to put forth very honest and even impious and doubtful questions. Questions are posed to God and to the truths of the biblical texts until, as Kidner says, answers begin to present themselves.

The transition into the last stage comes in verses 9-12. Asaph decides to meditate on the redemptive miracles of God at the time of the exodus. Notice that he “appeals” (v. 10) to the account of the exodus. Lawyers know that you only “appeal” a case when you hope for a different conclusion from the one you received in the lower court. In the same way, the psalmist believes that meditating on God’s works in history will lead to a more hopeful conclusion than meditating too much on his own past and record. In other words, the psalmist began by meditating on his own sin, but he then turns to meditate on God’s grace — his redemptive acts in history. That begins to remove the roadblock in his spirit.

Verses 13-20 spell out an example of a “successful” meditation on God’s grace, his redemptive acts in history. What are these redemptive acts? They are times when God broke into history with miracles (v. 14) to “redeem” the children of Joseph and Jacob. The word “redeem” means to be “ransomed out of slavery.” God literally redeemed his people when he brought them out of Egypt through miracles done so that all peoples could see them (v. 14). In verses 16 and 19 we see God’s power over water in the parting of the Red Sea. In verses 17-18 we see the thunder and lightning of God over Mt. Sinai. And yet, despite these awesome displays of power, God’s concern was to tenderly care for his people as a shepherd guides his flock (v. 20). The contrast of verses 16-19 with verse 20 is intentional. Asaph is asking, “If a God like *this* (referring to the power) loves me like *this* (referring to the tenderness), then what am I afraid of?” That is meditation! He muses and thinks on the might and love of God as shown in the past, in order to overwhelm his fears that God has finally abandoned him.

How would a Christian meditate differently?

As we saw in Psalm 56, Christians have more powerful resources for soul strength than even the best Old Testament writers. Asaph here meditates on the exodus, a very concrete demonstration of God’s saving love. But the saving

love of God in the exodus took the form of a great physical and political victory — the complete defeat of a powerful army. Asaph seems to be thinking, “God came through and defeated our enemies in the past, so I just know he will come through and defeat our enemies in the present.”

But how will a believer get strength of soul to deal with real, devastating *defeats*? There are plenty of times when God has not come through with physical and political victory. How can we be sure that “God is for us” regardless of *any* historical circumstances? If we only knew as much about God’s love and justice as the Old Testament saints knew, we would certainly despair in the face of the massacres and disasters that good and faithful people have experienced.

For their meditation, Christians have a far more vivid display of God’s love on a mountain than Mt. Sinai. They know about a far more gracious guidance than the fiery pillar and cloud that led Israel through the Red Sea. Jesus Christ was God’s ultimate break-in to history. His miracles were the greatest and his death on the mountain of grace answers the fears we have about obeying the Ten Commandments given on the mountain of the Law. We have a far better way to assure ourselves that God will never abandon us or leave us. Jesus accomplished salvation *through* a defeat of terrible suffering, not just *in spite* of it! Jesus’ death for us on the cross is the greatest assurance possible that God is for us. His death on the cross is a model for the way God often works out his purposes in history. David and Asaph did not have such a vivid example of victory through defeat.

Jesus’ death was the truest exodus and ultimate redemption out of bondage for his people. When we meditate on *that*, we will have the resource we need to face anything in this world and in this life.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 203.

² Derek Kidner, p. 278.

Psalms

Meditation VI

Study 6 | Psalm 103

1. Who is being addressed in this psalm, and what does that teach us about meditation?

This psalm is addressed to “my soul.” Here we see one of the definitions of meditation: taking the self and the heart in hand, to argue with it and talk to it. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said that meditation is talking to your heart rather than listening to your heart. (He made that comment in a sermon on Psalm 42, another self-talking meditation: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God.”) ¹

Meditation is an inward dialogue with oneself. Derek Kidner says that David is “rousing himself to shake off apathy or gloom... using his mind and memory to kindle his emotion.” ² Thus the psalmist gives us an extremely directive and assertive example of meditation. It means taking your heart in hand, reasoning with it and exhorting it until it becomes engaged in “blessing” and rejoicing in God. We are not helpless before our emotions. Meditation is a very assertive way of bringing the truth to our own hearts and emotions, sometimes almost pummeling them into submission. We must be careful here to remember that this does not mean we are to *deny* the emotions of the heart. “Self-talk” cannot mean repressing and hiding our doubts and fears, as we saw in Psalm 77. Rather, once we have truly come to see our hearts for what they are, we “tell ourselves the truth” and “preach to ourselves” very firmly.

2. Define “bless.” How can you bless God? Why does it take your whole being to bless God?

The word “bless” has a fairly vague and sentimental connotation in the English language. As a result, the NIV translation translates “Bless the LORD, O my soul” as “Praise the LORD, O my soul.” Though the ideas are similar, they are not identical. To “bless” something in the Bible is the opposite of to “curse.” When we bless people, we affirm or delight in them and therefore seek their delight and fulfillment. We bless when we seek to give them the deepest desires of their hearts.

Therefore, to bless God is somewhat more personal than simply to praise him. Better yet, it is intimate *personal* praise. ³ It means (1) to identify those things that he most desires and those things that would most glorify him, and then (2) to long for his joy and glory, and (3) to give him the things that accord with this joy and glory.

The idea of “blessing God” seems to reverse our normal understanding of the word. We know that God blesses *us* by bringing us joy and deep fulfillment. Obviously, God’s peace and fulfillment are not things we have the power to bestow on him as he can on us. Yet the call to “bless God” points to a

wonderful mystery. He has tied his heart to us voluntarily, so that now our submission to and enjoyment of his glory *does* bless him and bring him joy. In summary: to bless God is to give him joy by enjoying and rejoicing in him. We give joy *to* him by taking joy *in* him. (Actually, that is the heart of any real love relationship that is not manipulative.)

Why does it take “all that is within me” (AV) or “all my inmost being” (NIV) to bless the LORD? Since “to bless” means “giving joy by taking joy” in God, this entails a deep stirring of one’s own heart. Mere praise could simply consist of an enumeration of God’s attributes. But the personal praise of “blessing God” will only “work” if you are celebrating God’s beauty and glory inwardly, delighting in his attributes, not simply naming them.

Eugene Peterson says that Psalm 103 “expresses the *experience* (not the doctrine) of salvation. This is what it *feels* like to be saved.”³

3. What are the benefits we forget? Survey verses 3-5 for the actions of God. Meditate on how each action benefits you practically.

First, he “forgives all your sins” (v. 3a). This has to do with the *guilt* of sin. The legal liability is removed, no matter how extensive our sinfulness has been (notice: “*all* your sins”).

Second, he “heals all your diseases” (v. 3b). There are some who interpret this as a promise that God will heal all physical ailments and sicknesses if we ask. But the Hebrew literary style of parallelism means that verse 3b would not be a complete change in subject. When parallel phrases are used, the same truth is being stated in two ways, each with a slightly different perspective that enriches the understanding. This leads most commentators to conclude that God will deal with the *guilt* of our sin (v. 3a) and the *suffering* and damage our sin causes (v. 3b). Sin always has two effects: legal and actual. Legally, we are due punishment from eternal justice. In actual life, sin always damages our characters, souls, and relationships.

In the language of traditional theology, verse 3a is basically about “justification” (an immediate, legal act that puts us right with God, pardoned and free from condemnation). Verse 3b is basically about “sanctification” (a gradual process by which God’s Spirit heals the fears, anger, and weakness of character that are the results of our sin. Derek Kidner notes, “For all the similarity of these two phrases, there is a difference between God’s handling of *iniquity* [sin] and of *diseases*, which was made plain in David’s own case when he repented of his sin with Bathsheba. Forgiveness was immediate; but [immediate] healing [of the baby born to them] was denied, in spite of several days of prayer and fasting... If relationship with God is paramount, this makes good sense, for sin [and guilt] destroys it, while suffering *may* deepen it (Heb. 5:8; 12:11).”⁵

Third, he “redeems your life from the pit” (v. 4a). “The pit” simply means the grave. This may be a prayer for God to rescue him from a premature death but, considering the magnitude of the other “benefits” in this list, that is not likely. It is also not possible that the word “redeem” here refers to pardon from sins. David has already thanked God for that, and besides, he is not asking to be redeemed from sin, but from the grave. What we have here is a confidence that he will be ushered into eternal life and, probably, a declaration that he will experience the resurrection from the dead.⁶

Fourth, he “crowns you with love and compassion” (v. 4b). This may simply mean that God loves us, but the word “crown” seems to refer to something more. God imparts an experience of his love to us in a way that makes us feel honored and built up. The NIV translation “love” does not give an adequate signal that this is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which is commonly translated “steadfast love” or “unfailing love.” *Chesedh* means binding, guaranteed, covenant love — bomb-proof love! It could just as well be called “gospel love.” It is a love that is not subject to change; it does not come or go on the basis of our merits or performance. (The word is also used in verse 17, when it says that God’s gospel love is from “everlasting to everlasting.”) It is *this* kind of love that is a “crown” — a name, an honor, a status. We get our status and honor from God’s gospel love, not from human kingdoms and honors. Following Eugene Peterson here (in his view that Psalm 103 is about our *experience* of salvation), I think David is talking about the enormous new identity that is ours when we experience his love through the Holy Spirit. We know we are in his royal family.

Fifth, he “satisfies your desires” in such a way that “your youth is renewed like an eagle’s” (v. 5). Here we have God’s gift of hope. There is no more wonderful picture of boundless strength than young eagles soaring on the wind. Derek Kidner quotes Weiser, who says, “The poet realizes that the opportunities which life offers lie before him just as they did in the sunny days of his youth.”⁷ In light of our new identity, our assurance of the resurrection, and our confidence that God is going to heal us into holiness, we have a tremendously full and hopeful future. If we grasp the first four actions of God — justification, sanctification, resurrection, and adoption — we will naturally find a continual renewal of our strength.

When you meditate on the practical benefits of each blessing, consider the following:

- Justification gives us a freedom from the past.
- Sanctification gives us an assurance that God is working in the present.
- Resurrection gives us a certainty about our future.
- He honors us, so that no one’s lack of approval should overthrow us.
- He wants to satisfy us with good things, so if we are suffering or going without, he must have an awfully good reason for letting that go on.

4. What remarkable claims are made about the believer's status before God in verses 8-19? Which of these claims do you most need to grasp personally right now? How does the work of Christ shed light on these claims?

What is a believer's status?

First, verses 8-9 tell us that believers do not have to fear God's wrath. His wrath is not as fundamental as his love. Luther says that God's wrath is his "strange work." God's anger is what happens when his goodness comes into contact with our rebellion and sin. That means God's anger is a relatively temporary phenomenon. After he deals with our sin through his redemption, his anger will cease. He will not keep it forever, but his love is permanent (1 Cor. 13:8-13).

Second, verse 10 tells why God's wrath should not be feared; namely, because he will not make us pay our own debt! Verse 10a says that he will not treat us as if we have sinned; he will treat us as if we lived far better lives than we really have. Verse 10b goes even further and says that the debt we owe will not be required of us. This has to be one of the most astounding verses in the Old Testament. Verse 8 is almost a word-for-word restatement of what God said to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:6. Then in Exodus 34:7, God says that he "will by no means clear the guilty" (KJV). The psalmist here, at first glance, seems to be directly contradicting that statement. He says, "He will *not* make you pay, even though you are guilty." As we will see below, this statement makes no sense without an understanding of the cross of Christ. Unless we see that Jesus made full payment of sin on our behalf, we will have to choose *either* what Moses said ("he will not clear the guilty") or what David said ("he will clear the guilty").

Third, in verses 11-14, the psalmist uses three incredibly rich images to teach us about our status before God.

His love toward us is "as high as the heavens are above the earth," which of course is an infinite distance. Today we know even more than David did how infinite and immeasurable is the span of the heavens — the universe. The psalmist is saying that God's love for us is infinite.

His mercy and forgiveness toward us are "as far as is the east from the west," which again, of course, is an infinite distance. This brilliant metaphor tells us that, *by definition*, our sins cannot bring us into condemnation. Just as the "west" — no matter how you define it — can never be in the same place as the "east," so our salvation removes the liability of our sins from us in God's sight. God does not look at us in connection with our sin.

His knowledge of and care for us is "as a father has compassion on his children," which is unconditional and unlimited. Notice the two parts to this family love: On the one hand, a father knows his children and all their weaknesses (v. 14, "he remembers that we are dust"). An adult can see right

into the heart of a child, who does not have the sense or wherewithal to hide his or her selfishness, impatience, lack of understanding, etc. Just so, God knows how shallow, weak, and impotent we are. Yet, on the other hand, a father has deep compassion on his children (v. 13). Their weakness does not alienate his heart. Rather, the more silly, weak, and needy a child is, the more a parent's heart is bound up with the child. Just so, God loves us completely — not only in spite of his knowledge of our sin, but because of it. (Thus the implied relationship of verses 13 and 14: "He has compassion on us, for he knows how weak we are.") This is because God's love for us is not simply the love of a king for his subjects, but the love of a father for his children.

Which of these claims do you most need to grasp personally?

The three claims of a believer's status before God are these:

In general, God's love for us is immeasurable.

In particular, we enjoy (1) *The status of justification*. God's forgiveness of our sin is limitless and unconditional. He never views us in terms of our sin. (2) *The reality of "adoption."* God has adopted us into his family. We do not simply have a legal status of "no condemnation," we have his heart. We have his tender care, not in spite of our weakness but because of it. God knows us completely, yet cares for us perfectly.

How does the work of Christ shed light on these claims?

This question is, if anything, too weak. Christ's work does not simply "shed light" on these claims. Without Jesus, these claims are almost nonsense! How can a holy God who says, "I will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex. 34:7), go on to do that very thing? How can he say, "I won't make you pay your debt"? Then who *will* pay the debt? Let's look at the claims of Psalm 103 through Christ.

- (1) The claim of *justification* is made three times in Psalm 103 (v. 3, "forgives"; v. 10, "does not repay us according to our iniquities"; v. 12, "removes our transgressions"). In Christ: "God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished... so as to be both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25-26).
- (2) The claim of *sanctification* is made in verse 3b ("heals all your diseases"). In Christ: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son... in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who... live... according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4).

- (3) The assurance of *resurrection* is offered in verse 4a (“redeems your life from the pit”) and the hope of a glorious future in verse 5. In Christ: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you” (Rom. 8:11).
- 4) The status of *adoption* is referenced in verse 14. In Christ: “For you did not receive a spirit... of fear... but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8:15).
- 5) The honor of being “*crowned*” with *gospel love* is given in verse 4b. In Christ: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). Not only do we have the personal relationship with God as his little children, but we have the honor and status of being his “heirs,” as adult children.

5. What do all the individuals in verses 20-22 have in common?

They are all beings who are created by God and they are all perfectly obedient to God. The psalmist is saying that when I learn to rejoice inwardly in who I am in Christ and begin to live in accordance with that, I join the enormous dance and symphony of praise and blessing already going on in the universe. The psalmist begins the psalm with the call and the effort to “bless” the LORD with his individual soul (vv. 1-2). Now at the end, he shows us that this is never a solo! ⁸ When we bless the Lord, we suddenly find the rest of the universe singing to us and with us! “How doth all the world... sing to a sanctified soul,” wrote Jonathan Edwards. ⁹

Psalm 103 shows us that, ironically, meditation on the grace of the gospel can bring us to the same place that Eastern meditation wants to take us — namely, to oneness with nature. In 103:19-22, David tells us that it is only when praising God that he truly experiences oneness with all creation — for it is then that he realizes what all nature is *doing* — rejoicing in God! Eastern meditation seeks to get us to this oneness by suppressing the analytical side of the mind. Christian meditation, however, gets us to oneness in nature by stimulating our analysis and reflection — and having it center on the glory and grace of God.

6. Meditating on Christ has been called “preaching the gospel to yourself.” Summarize all the things you learn about preaching the gospel to your own heart from this psalm.

The best way to meditate on how to preach the gospel to yourself is to ask this question: *What happens to me when I forget this particular benefit of the gospel?* The number of answers to this question is infinite. Here is a very brief set of examples to get you started.

- When I forget justification, I am flooded with guilt and regret about the past. I live in bondage to idols that make me feel better about myself.
- When I forget sanctification, I give up on myself and stop trying to change.
- When I forget resurrection and hope, I lose my excitement. I become afraid of aging and death.
- When I forget my adoption, I become full of fears. I don't pray with candor. I try to hide my faults from God and myself.
- When I forget my honor, I become shy. I lose my confidence. I become self-conscious about my appearance.

¹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 20.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 364.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 364.

⁴ Eugene H Peterson, *Psalms: Prayers of the Heart* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 26.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 365.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 365.

⁷ Derek Kidner, p. 365.

⁸ Derek Kidner, p. 365.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards in the first of his "Miscellanies," found in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 13*, Thomas A. Schafer, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 163.

Psalm

Repentance I

Study 7 | Psalms 6 and 32

Introduction

Our next “class” of psalms will be those that major in a form of prayer called confession, repentance, or “affective” prayer. The two psalms we will study complement each other, though they are both penitential psalms. The first psalm conveys the white heat of an actual time of repentance. Its motives are somewhat mixed, though it is accepted by God. The second psalm looks back on a time of repentance. It provides a more theologically balanced perspective on the elements involved in a prayer of confession. Nevertheless, it is important to see that God accepts our repentance even when it is imperfect.

Psalm 6

- 1. (a) What are some of the reasons why people weep and cry? (Who or what do we cry for?) (b) Why is it important to not simply weep, but to pray in our tears (or to “pray our tears”)?**

(a) What are some of the reasons why people weep?

Some of the healthy reasons we cry are: (1) Loss and grief. This occurs when we experience the loss of something real or potential that was good and beautiful. (2) Sympathy for hurt or injustice. This occurs when we enter into someone else’s misery so that we feel it ourselves. (3) Repentance and regret. This occurs when we know we have done something wrong.

Some of the unhealthy reasons we cry are: (1) Self-pity. Self-pity looks a lot like grief, but self-pity doesn’t want any help or solutions. It is inconsolable; it wants to go on feeling bad. Why? If we make a good thing into an idol — into an ultimate thing — we believe there can be no replacement for it. If we don’t get *this*, we don’t want anything else. (2) Manipulation. We are crying because others are present and we want to influence them in a particular direction. This doesn’t mean that the tears are not based in genuine sorrow, but they are overdone and used to get power. (3) Self-will. We are crying because our will has been crossed. The tears are an expression of fury and anger. (At the same time, we must remember that angry tears can be quite *unselfish*, as when we weep over injustice and evil in the world.)

(b) Why is it important to “pray our tears”?

Tears may be rooted rather simply in one of these reasons or motives. But often there is more than one root, and that makes sorrow and weeping more complex. Usually there are both good and bad motives in our weeping. For example, we may start weeping in grief, but idolatrous self-pity may lengthen or magnify our weeping out of proportion. Or, we may start weeping in anger over injustice or in sympathy for another, but self-righteousness can make our

tears bitter and vengeful. Or, we may weep over our sins, but a works righteousness understanding of faith could lead us to weep as a way to flagellate ourselves as we try to atone for our own sin. (“See how bad I feel, God? See how bad I feel, world? Surely I am worthy to be forgiven. Look how much I am suffering under my guilt!”)

Therefore, to either indulge our tears or stifle them is an over-reaction and an unhealthy response. As Eugene Peterson expresses it:

Tears are a biological gift of God. They are a physical means for expressing emotional and spiritual experience. But it is hard to know what to do with them. If we indulge our tears, we cultivate self-pity. If we suppress our tears, we lose touch with our feelings... [But if] we *pray* our tears, we enter into sadnesses that integrate our sorrows with our Lord’s sorrows and discover both the source of and the relief from our sadness.”¹

If we repress our tears, we may miss an opportunity to plumb our heart’s inner workings and see our motivations, both good and bad. But if we merely ventilate our sorrow, we may only be encouraging some sins in our hearts. Thus, praying *in* our sorrow *about* our sorrow (that’s what “praying our tears” means) can help us get perspective on our situation. It can help us overcome idolatrous, inconsolable grief while still expressing the sadness that is good and necessary to any loving heart living in this difficult world.

2. What are some reasons why the psalmist is (or may be) weeping?

First, David may be weeping in response to the wrath and displeasure of God (v. 1). Notice that the psalmist does not say, “Don’t be angry with me.” He assumes that God is angry! He knows he has done something that has displeased God. He is only asking, “Do not rebuke... or discipline me in your wrath.” He is asking for mercy “to temper the discipline he deserves.”²

Second, he may be weeping because he is sick (v. 2a). This sickness may be simply the result of guilt. It is well-known that shame, guilt, and despondency can cause real physical breakdown (and not just psychosomatic symptoms). It is also possible that the sickness is itself a form of discipline or chastening from God — a way to bring David to his senses or to repentance. It is important to keep a balance here. In the Bible, sickness could be either an *effect* of a person’s conviction of sin or a *cause* of it. On the one hand, John 9:1-5, Psalm 73:1-5 (and the whole book of Job!) teach that we must not think, in some nice, neat, cause-effect way, that good-life-leads-to-health and bad-life-leads-to-illness. Very good people can have lots of sickness and tragedy and bad people can have great quality of life. So we must not think that sickness is necessarily a punishment or that health is a reward. On the other hand, Hebrews 12 and many other biblical texts show us that sometimes God does use troubles and illness to bring us up short, humble us, and make us reflect on our errant ways. (See Psalm 119:67: “Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I obey your

word.") Thus David's sickness could be a debilitating result of his guilt and despondency, or it could have been a way God showed him his need for him.

When David closely connects a request for mercy (v. 2a) with a request for healing (v. 2b), we can conclude that the sickness is involved in his repentance, one way or the other. (That is, it is either a result of his guilt or a way to show him his guilt.) It is very difficult to discern the exact relationship between sin and sickness, and we should not be too quick to make sweeping statements one way or the other.

Third, David is certainly weeping because of his enemies (v. 7). Most closely tied to his statement about his tears is the opposition he is receiving from his enemies ("My eyes grow weak with sorrow... because of all my foes"). Since David is afraid of the grave (v. 5), it is possible that these enemies are out to kill him. Some think that this possibility of death is due to his sickness, but there is much less emphasis on his illness than on his enemies. When he receives his confidence that he is being heard in verses 8-10, all his rejoicing is over his escape from his enemies. *They* are the real problem he is facing.

In summary, David is struggling with a guilty conscience, a sick body, and a dangerous situation filled with enemies. We cannot be sure exactly how all three are related. We can't know which factor caused which, for example. However, we can see that David believes that they are connected. He asks God's mercy, healing, and help with all three of them, all together.

3. What does David ask for in this prayer? How does he make the case for his request?

There is only one request in this psalm, and it is posed at the very beginning (v. 1). Essentially, David is asking, "Please don't give me what my sins deserve!" We can probably fill the prayer out like this: "Because of what I have done, I deserve to have you abandon me to my enemies. But I ask, rather, that you forgive me and defend me."

He proceeds to make his argument as follows: First, in verses 2-3, he asks God to be merciful because he is suffering and in pain. "Be merciful to me... for I am faint... in agony... in anguish." This implies that God is compassionate and moved by suffering.

Second, in verse 4, he asks God to be merciful because of his covenant and promises. "Deliver me... because of your unfailing love." Again, we must remember that when we see the phrases "*unfailing love*" or "*steadfast love*" (or in the AV, "lovingkindness"), it is translating the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which meant a love that is absolutely guaranteed and unchanging because of a promise and contract. Our word "commitment" is too weak to convey this term, but at least it begins to give us the sense. *Chesedh* has little to do with feelings and sentiment and everything to do with covenanted loyalty. It is the love that extends from a solemn vow.

Third, in verse 5, he asks God to be merciful for the sake of his own glory. If God gives him what he deserves, his enemies will sweep over him and he will likely be killed. "Then," he asks, "what good will that bring God, to lose a worshiper?" **[Note:** Though it is true that Old Testament writers had a more vague and shadowy understanding of heaven and hell than later biblical writers, we must not think that David is trying to teach us something about the afterlife here. He is simply saying, "If I am dead, how can I serve you?"] So David makes his case, appealing to God's glory, but he leaves it as just that: an appeal and a question. "How can my death serve you?"

In summary, David builds his case on the attributes of God: on his compassion for the suffering (which leads him to alleviate misery), his covenant love (which leads him to unconditional positive regard), and his glory.

4. Do you find David's attitude in argumentative prayer legitimate? Assuming it is basically legitimate, how does it contradict many common views on how to approach God in prayer and faith?

Are David's attitude and arguments legitimate?

There is some debate over the legitimacy of David's arguments. Taken at their worst, he appears to question God's timing. "How long?" in verse 3 seems to be saying, "You've let this go on too long." But it is also an honest outpouring of emotion and a carefully discreet cry. (He doesn't say, "This *has* been too long!") Secondly, in verse 5 he argues that God should forgive and save him because God will otherwise lose a worshiper (see above). Some people believe that this argument is an unworthy one. Some criticize it, saying "How silly to imagine that God *needs* us. David is suggesting that God is vain and/or dependent on our praise." In reality, however, David is probably striking a balance here. He is right to insist that the *real* concern in any situation is the honor and glory of God. So it is right for David to say, "I ask you to spare my life because I think it will glorify you. I don't see how my death can serve your interests." However, though it is our right to pose this question, it is not within our rights or our capacity to answer it. Only God knows if an event will lead to his glory; we cannot insist that we can know this.

Having defended David's basic motives and argument, I think it is also good to learn that though our language can be intemperate and our motives mixed, God will still hear us (v. 8).

How does it contradict common views about approaching God?

First, it contradicts a fatalistic view of God and faith. Many people might say, "God is sovereign, and he has his plan all laid out and set. You are not going to change his mind! So just wait patiently to see what happens." However, though David has a most respectful attitude toward God and makes nothing like

a real demand, he is very insistent about pressing his case. He acts like his prayer really matters and will make a difference.

Second, it contradicts a legalistic view of God and faith. A more authoritarian and strict view of faith would counsel, "Don't you dare ask God to let you off the hook! You should humbly say to God, 'Do to me whatever my sins warrant.' Since you have sinned, you deserve the problem you have with your enemies. It's God's will and his punishment. Just take it." David, however, vigorously appeals to God's love, grace, and mercy to deliver him from his troubles. Despite his own sense of guilt and his willingness to take responsibility, he nonetheless knows that his enemies are wrong, unjust, and wicked. He does not collapse and let them walk all over him because of his own sense of unworthiness. He contends with them. He does not need to feel virtuous in order to fight for justice.

Third, it contradicts a relativistic, "liberal" view of God and faith. Today, a significant number of people (including churchgoers) are dismayed by any talk of the wrath of God. They say, "God loves everyone. We all slip up and sometimes we do very bad things. But God forgives always; that is the way he is. He is a God of love. So it is wrong to talk about his 'anger' and 'wrath' (v. 1). It is especially wrong to wait to see if he is going to 'let you off the hook.' Of course he will!" However, David has a far more respectful attitude toward the justice and holiness of God than that. Though he is begging for mercy, he all along admits it is just that — mercy, undeserved favor. He never says, "Deliver me because what I did isn't really all that bad." How can we ever ask God to deal with our enemies for their wrongs if we aren't willing to take responsibility for our own?

Fourth, it contradicts an overly optimistic, "super-spiritual" view of God and faith. David is not doing any confident "claiming" of blessing. He is making his case — more assertively than the legalist would think appropriate, but more modestly and humbly than many other Christians would think appropriate. As Eugene Peterson observes:

Our culture emphasizes... the happy Christian and the have-it-all-together saint. Are we missing something? ...Tears are often considered a sign that something is wrong with us... and therefore either to be avoided or to be cured. But what if they are a sign of something right with us? ³

5. When are tears (of sorrow) a sign of spiritual strength and character? Are David's tears a sign of spiritual strength?

There are at least three things it is wrong *not* to weep over. First, we should weep over our sins, which offend and grieve God and others. A lack of tears over our sin shows we lack a clear and proportional sense of what sin is and what it means. (It shows a lack of holiness in us.) Second, we should weep

over injustice and evil in the world. The brokenness of the world and the troubles of humankind continually bring sorrow to God's heart. Jesus was constantly weeping in sympathy for the misery of others. A lack of tears over injustice and suffering shows a lack of love in us. Third, we should weep over our own losses and disappointments. Why? A person who never weeps over losses is probably someone who does not want to know his or her own heart. Maybe we have too little a sense of the reality of God to admit how devastated we are. Maybe we need to think of ourselves as extremely strong and unflappable. Maybe we simply cannot bear to admit how fragile we are. These all reflect a lack of humility and self-knowledge.

David does have tears over all three things. He weeps over his guilt (v. 1), over the injustice of evildoers (vv. 7-8), and over his own losses and pain (vv. 2-3), both physical and spiritual. But the importance of "praying" our tears is so that these three valid, spiritually strong forms of sorrow do not "go bad." Repentance can easily become a self-flagellation in which we become inconsolable and try to pay for our own sin, rather than looking to God. Sorrow over injustice can easily become bitterness and self-righteousness that make us feel justified in treating someone vengefully. And grief can easily become self-pity.

Each of these false, excessive kinds of sorrow comes from forgetting the bad news of the gospel (that we are more sinful than we dared believe) or the good news (that we are more loved and accepted than we dared hope). Repentance and grief need to hold onto the good news, or we may refuse to be consoled out of self-punishment or anger at God. Sorrow over others' trouble needs to hold onto the bad news (that we are all sinners), or we may become proud and vindictive. David seems to have kept both his anger at his enemies and his humility and shame before God. Without the gospel, he would have lost one or the other.

Ultimately, we know that tears can be a sign of spiritual strength because Jesus, our perfect older brother, was "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Is. 53:3), who wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and his friend Lazarus' tomb — even when he was about to raise him from the dead (John 11:35).

6. Does David get an answer to his prayer? How does he get it?

This is a difficult question to answer. It is clear that in verse 8, the tone changes markedly. David says, "The LORD has heard my weeping" and the Lord "accepts my prayer." Yet verse 10 shows us that God has not done anything at all yet. David says, "My enemies *will* be ashamed and dismayed," meaning that nothing has happened yet.

How then does David know God has answered? Derek Kidner gives us insight.

This sudden access of confidence, found in almost every suppliant psalm, is most telling evidence of *an answering touch from God*, almost as if we saw the singer's face light up in recognition. In subsequent liturgical use God's reassurance was possibly conveyed (some have suggested) by... a [prophetic] oracle... but this is a conjecture, and has little if any bearing on the writing of these psalms, which show the same characteristics whether their titles emphasize their liturgical use (as in Psalms 4-6) or in the crises from which they sprang (e.g. Psalms 3, 7, etc.).⁴

Kidner is saying that the psalmist gives evidence that a penitent can receive in his or her own heart a sense of God's forgiveness and assurance of his love. This may not come immediately. We often must "wait" in repentance (see Ps. 38:15). This means that, even if we have an intellectual confidence that the covenant God's unfailing love will not cast us off, we may not demand or expect an immediate restoration of spiritual fellowship after we have sinned. We patiently wait for a restored sense of God's love and beauty, which might not return for some time. Eventually, though, we experience what Kidner called "an answering touch."

Psalm 32

1. Verses 1-2 describe the blessing of being pardoned by God in four ways. What does each metaphor contribute to our understanding of what God does about our sin? Compare Romans 4:7-8.

Four things are part of the "blessedness" and joy of those whose sin has been dealt with by God.

First, God *forgives* our transgression (v. 1a). In general, to forgive something means to lift it up and throw it away — to remove it. But second, God *covers* our transgression (v. 1b). This metaphor is different from the idea of forgiveness. When we cover something, it is still present, but we are not letting it affect us in the same way. We take it away from our attention.

It is quite important that these two ideas are kept together. If we only thought of our sin as forgiven, we might think that as soon as God pardons us, our sin will be gone and will not trouble us anymore. If, on the other hand, we only thought of our sin as covered, we might think that, once God pardons us, we can live any way we like. But together, we can see that in a Christian, sin cannot condemn us and it has lost much of its power over us, but it is still present. We must not imagine that we are completely free of it.

Third, God *does not count our sin against us*. This is the most clear and specific of all the metaphors. It uses accounting and legal language. We are told that God does not “count” (or “reckon” or “impute” in the older translations) us as sinners. Though we have sinned, God does not treat us as if we are sinners. Paul quotes Psalm 32:2 in Romans 4:6-8. There he says that in Psalm 32:2, David “speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” That is an extremely interesting reading of verse 2! David says only that God does not count a repentant believer as a sinner. “But,” Paul is saying, “that means that he must be counting us as *righteous*, apart from our actual record.” Paul then reads verse 2 as saying, “Great blessedness comes to the one whose sinful record is not counted, but rather is treated by God as if his record is one of perfect righteousness.”

Surely the Old Testament readers would have found this claim marvelous and wonderful — but extremely mysterious. How can God take our sin from us without giving us any consequences for it? And even more, how can he treat us as righteous, as sinless? We know what Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21, namely, that it was Christ who was counted as sinner for our sakes so that we could be counted righteous for his sake. He is treated as our record deserves, and we are treated as his record deserves.

Fourth, we are told that the person who has his sin forgiven and covered by imputed righteousness has a spirit in which “is no deceit” (v. 2b). This does not mean that a forgiven person is perfect, but rather is honest, not hiding or covering his or her flaws from God, self, or others. The question may arise, Is this transparency/honesty the *result* of the pardon or the *means* of it? The answer is both. It takes transparency to be pardoned (see v. 5). At the same time, the sense of being accepted (v. 2a) makes it possible to admit flaws and sins freely.

2. Verses 3-10 are a very complete guide to actual repentance. What must we do when we repent? (Try to find at least four elements.) How can we pray these things in Christ with even more power and understanding than David could?

First, there must be a very simple *honesty* (v. 5). As someone put it, “If we cover our own sin (v. 5), then God will expose it; but if we uncover our sin, then God will cover it (v. 2).” But honesty alone is not repentance.

Second, David fills his heart with a sense of the *danger* of sin. He enumerates the problems and bad consequences of sin. One danger (v. 3) is (as we saw in Psalm 6) that his sin and guilt are bad for his health. His strength, probably spiritual as well as physical, is sapped (v. 4). Another danger is that God might abandon him. In verse 6 David talks about praying “while you may be found” that “when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him” (v. 6). He seems to be saying that when troubles come, God will not be with you if you sin.

Third, however, David fills his heart with a sense of the *guilt* of sin. If we don't think of the danger of sin, we may not initially be motivated to repent. But if the only motivation for repentance is the avoidance of consequences, we are not really going deep enough. We are to repent for our *sin*, not simply for the *consequences* of sin. Are we sorry for what we did, or sorry we got caught? If we are only sorrowful for our own pain and inconvenience, we will find that we have gained no self-control at all. As soon as it is possible to do the sinful act without consequences, we will find ourselves back in it. But David says, "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you" (v. 9). This is a powerful metaphor. The horse or mule does not love you, nor does it understand your mind and heart enough to come to you just because you want it to come. It must be "controlled" through rewards and punishments. It will only come if you can make it worth its while. The horse and mule will only come for *their* sake, not for yours.

We are to be willing, then, to leave our sin simply because we love God. We should want to do it for his sake. That means we should turn from sin, not primarily because it is dangerous to us, but because it grieves and offends our Lord. We should sense the guilt of our sin before God, not just the danger of its consequences.

Fourth, David prays in *hope of unmerited mercy*. In verse 10 he says that "the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him." This again is a reference not to God's love in general, but to his *chesedh*, his promised, covenanted, unconditional love. To truly repent, you certainly need emotional humility — a sense of the danger and guilt of your sin. If you don't have that, you won't experience the life-changing freedom of repentance. But, on the other hand, to truly repent, you need also emotional "wealth." You need a deep hope and assurance of God's commitment to you, his love and mercy toward you.

You can't *only* know yourself to be a worthless sinner. That will not produce repentance, only self-pity and self-flagellation. There will be no "answering touch" (Ps. 6:8). There will be no release and relief. Not only that, but it is not really possible to be honest about how sinful you are unless you have the confidence that God loves you. If you base your self-image on your record and performance, it will be too traumatic to admit the extent of your sinfulness. You will be in denial, rationalizing and screening out evidence of deep character flaws. Unless you believe that "the LORD's unfailing love surrounds" you, you will not be able to repent. It takes the good news of the gospel as much as the bad news to lead our hearts to admit what we really are.

When Christian believers get to this third element in repentance, we have a far greater resource for hope than David did. He knew of the remarkable promises of God to bless us no matter what (see Genesis 15). But we have Jesus Christ on the cross. As one theologian put it, "The fact of Jesus coming is the final

and unanswerable proof that God cares.”⁵ This is the ultimate assurance of unfailing love. In light of this infallible assurance, we have the emotional wealth to admit our sin. When we know Christ, we truly have a “hiding place” (v. 7). As Moses was sheltered by the cleft in the rock so he could be in the presence of God, so we are now “hidden in Christ” (Col. 3:1-3), for the rock of Moses is a type of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Fifth, David hears God saying *he must now live an obedient, changed life*. In verse 8 David hears God saying, “I will now tell you exactly what I want you to do.” In verse 11, he calls us to be “upright.” In other words, the last element in repentance is a very concrete resolution to change behavior. Repentance is not simply expressing sorrow for sin, it is changing the life — obeying. Notice that the call to obey (v. 8) is connected to a call to do so out of love for God (v. 9). If our hearts understand how our sin has grieved God and what it has cost him (on the cross), we will find that our hearts *want* to obey God. Sin will lose its attractive power over us. We will not be obeying simply out of duty or out of a series of rewards and punishments.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Psalms: Prayers of the Heart* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 35.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 61.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, pp. 61, 36-37.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 63.

⁵ Attributed to British theologian William Barclay.

Psalm

Repentance II

Study 8 | Psalm 51

Introduction

This is surely the greatest of all the penitential psalms. It may be the most complete and profound example of repentance in the Bible, the New Testament included. This study will follow Derek Kidner's ¹ basic outline of this psalm, with additional titles:

Verses 1-2: "I ask"

Verses 3-5: "I confess"

Verses 6-12: "I need"

Verses 13-19: "I offer and promise"

Psalm 51

1. Read 2 Samuel 11:1-12:14, the setting for the psalm. Summarize the story.

David allowed himself to look on the physical beauty of Bathsheba (11:2), a woman married to one of David's key military men. Despite this, he sent for her and slept with her (11:4). She became pregnant, which created a huge problem. Since Uriah was away with the army, it would be obvious that the child was not his.

David embarks on a fruitless strategy to hide his affair from Uriah. He orders him home for a report from the war, hoping he will go home and sleep with his wife. But Uriah refuses to enter his home and enjoy its comforts while his men are in battle (11:6-13). Uriah reveals himself to be a man of integrity, in stark contrast with his king.

David finally arranges to have Uriah slain in battle (11:14-25) by having the soldiers withdraw quickly in a battle, leaving Uriah exposed. It does not appear that Bathsheba knew what David had done. After her time of mourning, David marries her and she bore him their son (11:25-27). However, it would almost certainly be evident to everyone that the child was born too soon after the marriage to have been the fruit of their legal union. This would have demoralized and disillusioned many government insiders. Certainly many would have even found the death of Uriah suspicious.

Nathan the prophet comes to David from the Lord and preaches one of the most vivid and brilliant sermons in history (12:1-12). By using an illustration of a rich man and a poor man, he blows through the rationalizations David must have been using to show him the ugly, evil reality of what he has done. He then declares that God will expose his sin and its punishment in public for all to see (12:12).

Psalm 51 must be read against this background. David's life had utterly exploded. He was guilty of murder, adultery, false witness, theft, and coveting. He had broken virtually the entire second table of the Ten Commandments. His shame was now going to be public. How could he ever look at himself in the mirror again? How could he rule as king? How could he stay in a covenant with God? David was plunged into a pit of utter despair, and it is a testimony to the enormous power of repentance that he was able to climb out and be restored to life again. Surely, David had fallen as far as anyone can imagine falling. Yet through repentance, his life was repaired.

2. Verses 1-2: "I ask." What is David asking for in this section? On what basis does he make his requests? (That is, how does he argue for forgiveness?) Is there not a contradiction between asking for "mercy" and yet making a case and argument?

What is he asking for?

First, he asks God for "mercy," which means an alleviation of suffering. He is asking God to take a merciful and kind attitude toward him. Second, he asks for this transgression to be "blotted out." This is a particular action. It means to change the record books so that there are no moral deficits or legal liabilities. Third, he asks God to "wash away" and "cleanse" him from sin. This doesn't have to do with David's record, but with David himself. He is asking for some inner work in his soul and heart. In other words, David is asking for God, in mercy, to deal with his sin objectively *and* subjectively, removing both the legal liability and the inner pollution and corruption that have been caused psychologically and spiritually. "Blot out my legal liability and cleanse my heart."

What is the basis or argument for his requests?

David asks for forgiveness by appealing to two things. First, he appeals to God's *unfailing love*. Here again is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means unconditional, binding, covenant love. This love is based on God's faithfulness and promise, not our merit. Secondly, he appeals to God's *compassion*, his inner love and kindness. David is making a respectful and humble argument on the basis of the objective (what God has said in his Word) and the subjective (who God is in himself).

Is there a contradiction?

This is more a paradox than a true contradiction. Derek Kidner writes:

The opening plea, *have mercy*, is the language of one who has no claim to the favor he begs. But *steadfast love* ["unfailing love," *chesedh*] is a covenant word. For all his unworthiness, David knows that he still belongs. [Compare this with] the paradox of the prodigal's words, "*Father, ...I am no more worthy to be called thy son.*"²

The prodigal son says, "I'm not worthy to be a son," but calls him "father" as he says it. This is the only right way for a believer in the gospel to come to God in repentance. On the one hand, we are absolutely unworthy and have no claim on God at all. We need to contemplate the fact that nothing but the bare will of God stands between us and condemnation. On the other hand, we know of his unfailing commitment to us. If we are more aware of one than the other, repentance will not cleanse us. If we think more on our unworthiness than our sonship, we will plunge into despair and either punish ourselves or run from God. Neither really gets at the root of sin. We don't learn to hate sin and it doesn't lose its attraction over us. However, if we think more on our sonship than our unworthiness, our status as God's children becomes a matter of indifference to us. We will feel that forgiveness is just "God's job"; we are not amazed or changed by it.

3. Verses 3-5: "I confess." What things does David admit here? How does each one contribute to a full repentance? (How would a failure to admit any one thing make his repentance inadequate?)

First, in (vv. 3-4a) he takes full responsibility for his actions. "I know my transgressions"; I have "sinned and done what is evil." By using the most blunt and ugly words ("transgression," "evil"), he avoids blame-shifting. Not only does he call his deed "evil," he confesses that "you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge" (v. 4c). This is the clearest indication that he is refusing to blame his upbringing, his impulses, his hormones, or his environment. He is saying, "I deserve judgment." He does not talk about low self-esteem, "acting out," addictions, lapses, "mistakes," or "needs." In the narrative of 2 Samuel, we have some hints of how David rationalized, denied, or found other ways to avoid placing the responsibility for his action squarely on himself. In 2 Samuel 11:25 he says, "The sword devours one and then another." In other words, "Ah, he could have been killed anyway! There's no reason why he hadn't been killed earlier. It's just bad luck that Bathsheba wasn't available anyway!" There are innumerable other ways David could have done this. "No one knows the sacrifices I have made as king. This is one small consolation for all I have done for my people. No one would understand, so I'll have to keep it a secret." But Nathan cuts through all this in 2 Samuel 12:9: "YOU struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword." No rationalizations! It was *his* sin, as much as if he had taken the sword into his own hand and run it through Uriah himself. In this psalm, David has embraced this primary element in repentance fully. There is no blame-shifting at all.

Second, in (v. 4a) he admits that his sin was primarily against God. "Against you, you *only* have I sinned." This is striking, and even shocking. Think of how he wronged Uriah! He also wronged Bathsheba, leading her into betrayal and sin. He made Joab an accomplice in evil. And he betrayed the trust of his people as their king, abusing his power. Yet David says his sin is against "you only." What does this mean? David is saying that his sin against God is so much more fundamental and serious that it is, in a sense, the only sin. Without *this* sin, the others would not have happened. In other words, David is saying that both the motivation and the guilt of the sin against God completely overshadow all the other sins involved. Why?

The Bible teaches that all sin is primarily and fundamentally an exercise of a "lordship" we do not deserve. We act as if we own ourselves, as if we have the knowledge and the right to be our own saviors and lords. Martin Luther said that we never break commandments two through ten unless we have already decided to break the first commandment. The first commandment is to "have no other gods before me." David could only commit adultery if he either (a) made himself his own god, assuming he was wiser than the God who made the laws or (b) made Bathsheba into an idol more important than God, believing that if he could not have her, he could not be happy. Or he could have done both at the same time. In any case, David had to sin against God *first*, putting something else in God's place, in order to sin against others.

Not only is the sin against God the primary *cause* of all other sin, it is also the primary reason for sin's offensiveness. What makes sin *sin* is that it grieves and offends God. If we repent over the consequences of sin ("I hurt people! I won't be able to rule Israel! I've failed my own standards! I will have low self-esteem!"), we are not really repenting of the sin itself. We are only sorry for what has happened to us. That is not repentance; that is self-pity. If this is all that is happening in your heart, you will only avoid the sin in the future if it hurts you; the sin itself has not become ugly to you and it has not lost its attractive power over you. If, however, you repent over the fact that sin has *broken God's heart* and dishonored the One to whom you owe everything, you will begin to find the sin itself heinous. It will lose its power, and you will be cleansed and free to change.

Third, in (v. 4b) he uses God's standards *alone* as the way to judge and weigh his actions. "I have... done what is evil in your sight." He has educated his conscience by searching out God's standards and views on the subject. This is critical because the Bible, unlike Jiminy Cricket, does not say, "Always let your conscience be your guide." The conscience can be over-scrupulous or under-scrupulous. It can bother us terribly for things that God in his Word says nothing about, while leaving us free over deeds that are evil "in God's sight." It follows that there are two opposite mistakes we must avoid in repentance. First, we must not allow ourselves to be overly controlled by human opinion, tradition, or culture. We must not be rigid and traditional, but ruthlessly bring the proscriptions and standards of our family, culture, and class under the

examination of the Word. Second, we must not follow our own hearts and feelings too much, saying, "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." Using God's eyes and Word as our standard can free us from being a slave of opinion. It can even free us from our own hearts. If our hearts condemn us where God has said we are free, we must learn to tell our feelings where to get off!

Fourth, in (v. 5) he admits that he now sees the depth of his sin in long-standing character flaws. As Kidner puts it, "The new perspective on his sin, as self-assertion against God, opens up a new self-knowledge. This crime, David now sees, was no freak event: it was in character; an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been, and of the faulty stock he sprang from." ³ David is not excusing himself; his comment has the opposite effect. He is now looking back at his whole life through the lens of his heart, and what he has learned about it through this terrible deed. He now understands himself in ways he could not before. His "denial" is over.

This is a very important part of repentance. It is useless to simply confess a particular incident, looking for forgiveness. Repentance must lead to a permanent increase in humility and dependence on God, and to a new, deeper awareness of our own besetting flaws. How else will repentance strengthen and change us?

Summary: We must educate our consciences with God's Word so that we get a true, proportionate sense of our sin. Without this, instead of true repentance we may be crushed with false or disproportionate guilt. Second, we must take full responsibility. Without this, instead of true repentance, we may only be blame-shifting. Third, we must repent of the sin itself as grieving God. Without this, instead of true repentance, we may only be indulging in self-pity. Fourth, we must use our sin to come to a permanently deeper and humbler self-knowledge. Without this, instead of true repentance and zeal to change, we may only be trying to get off the hook for this one incident.

4. Verses 6-13: "I need." (a) A series of futures begins in verse 6b. In this section, David outlines a whole new way of life in the future. What are the elements of this new life? (b) What parallel does verse 10 have with Genesis 1:1?

(a) A whole new way of life.

First, David asks for new integrity (v. 6). He admits that while he was being obedient and ethical outwardly, he was cherishing untruth and sin inwardly. He now asks that he would be as committed and desirous of truth and holiness on the inside as he professes to be on the outside. He had been, for a good while, a true hypocrite. While on the outside he went to worship and upheld the faith of Israel, inside he had been nursing resentment, self-pity, a hard and numb heart toward God, and perhaps fantasies of a better kind of life.

Second, he asks for a restoration of relationship. He asks, negatively, that God would “hide your face from my sins” (v. 9); positively, he asks for “cleans[ing] with hyssop” (v. 7) so that he will be “whiter than snow.” Kidner writes that this “alludes to the cleansing of the leper, sprinkled seven times with the sacrificial blood into which the bunch of hyssop was dipped as a sprinkler (cf. Lev.14:6f.); or it may refer to the ritual for cleansing those who had come into contact with a dead body (Num. 19:16-19).”⁴ Both rituals were intended to make a defiled person qualified for worship in the presence of God. In other words, this particular cleansing is a request for renewed fellowship with God. “I want to return to your presence,” David is saying. “Make me pure and acceptable in your sight.” Of course, we who understand the cross and imputed righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21) have a resource for this prayer that is far beyond what David possessed. We know now that in Christ, we can be “holy in [God’s] sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:22).

Third, he asks for a new singleness of spirit (v. 10). He asks for a “steadfast” spirit (v. 10) and a “willing” spirit (v. 12). This means something more than just strength in general. It appears to mean that he wants a new commitment to obedience, regardless of the consequences. “Willing” means eager and voluntary, reflecting a delight and a desire. True repentance, as we saw above, withers our sins at the motivational level. The things that seemed so important (our idols, with which we broke the first commandment) become less attractive if we have repented well. The sign of real repentance, then, is the end of double-mindedness and a divided heart and the assumption of an undivided heart fully devoted to God as our only God.

Fourth, he asks for a new life of intimacy (v. 11) with God. When he asked for cleansing, David was asking to be made fit for God’s presence. Now he begs for a subjective experience of that presence through the Holy Spirit. As Kidner says, this verse is not talking theologically about whether or not a believer can “lose his salvation”: “This verse is not concerned with the bare doctrine of perseverance, but with the practice of it.”⁵

Fifth, he asks for a new appreciation of the gospel (v. 12): “restore to me the joy of your salvation.” David admits here that he had lost the main dynamic of our lives — the gratitude and joy that come from knowing we have been saved. This is crucial. David had fallen into the indifference and boredom of works righteousness. He came to think of himself as receiving God’s favor and blessing through his spiritual obedience and achievement. But this fall and repentance have given him a new realization that he stands before God by grace alone. He has not earned his position; he has been “saved” or rescued. A rescued person is helpless and dying and has been delivered by the power and initiative of another. David sees that he will be a joyful person to the degree that he realizes this. Only through continual repentance can we keep this basic dynamic of joy in our lives.

(b) What parallel does verse 10 have with Genesis 1:1?

When David asks God to “create” this new heart, spirit, relationship, and life, he is acknowledging two things. First, he acknowledges the power of God. He expects a miracle. Only God can create. Second, he acknowledges his own unworthiness and impotence. For creation (rather than revision or repair) is always “out of nothing.” David is admitting that he has nothing to offer for raw material. Holiness and steadfastness will have to be created in him by God’s Spirit out of thin air.

5. Verses 13-19: “I offer and promise.” What does David offer to God in response to his restoration?

In this section we see that David believes a repentance-cleansed life will have community and social consequences.

First, in verses 13-14, we see that David expects his new faith to be highly winsome. He expects to attract many people to God. There is a “close connection between a joyous faith and an infectious one.”⁶ Here we see that David’s new faith will be winsome because he will be filled with a new joy. “My tongue will sing of your righteousness” (v. 14). So, the result of real repentance is joy, and the test of true gospel joy is that it blends the confidence and humility that strongly attract people to us. Question: Why must real repentance always make us more joyful and attractive, not less?

Remember the elements of repentance discussed in question 3. If we blame-shift instead of taking full responsibility, our repentance becomes a form of anger and resentment. That, of course, will not lead to joy or attractiveness.

We also said that if we only repent of our behavior under the pressure of consequences (rather than identifying the idols and God-replacements at the root of our sin), then our confession becomes either self-hatred or self-pity.

Self-hatred is a continuation of works righteousness in which we try to earn our salvation by our performance. In works righteousness, moral failure cannot really be forgiven. We can only punish ourselves severely until we have somehow proven ourselves holy. It is another form of moral effort and performance. Thus works righteousness confession is always prolonged and never leads to greater joy. It leads not to humility but to inferiority.

Self-pity comes when we have put some object in God’s place (or treated it as more important than God). Let’s say, for example, that we have made an idol out of romantic love and have broken God’s law in order to “catch” the person of our dreams. If we lose him or her anyway, we may become despondent and we will probably do some kind of repentance. But unless we admit that we were getting our joy and self-worth out of this person more than God, our confession will never bring us relief. Our hearts will just punish and curse us for having failed our “god.” The only God who forgives is the real Lord. Self-pity is

not consolable because our hearts are stubbornly insisting that “unless we have *that*, we can’t be happy.” Until we repent of our idolatry and admit that we have turned away from the only God who really can satisfy us, we will never have joy.

Again, we see that we have resources for joy that David did not have. When we compare our idols to Jesus, who died on the cross for us, we can easily see how foolish our hearts are to imagine that any lover would be more wonderful than he is; that any riches are more valuable than the riches of his glory and grace.

In summary, the first sign of true repentance (and the acid test to distinguish it from counterfeits) is that it breaks through into greater joy, a joy that is deeply attractive to others.

Second, in verses 15-17, we see that David expects his new life to be one of continual repentance. He speaks of a “broken spirit” and a “broken and contrite heart” in very positive terms, as a continual sacrifice offered to God. Sometimes a “broken spirit” can be used negatively to denote a person who is depressed and disconsolate. Here it probably means what Luther meant when he said, “All of life is repentance.” Rather than seeing repentance as an unusual event and a disruption of normal faith and practice, David now sees that a humble heart that regularly and readily repents of idols is needed to get through to joy. This second sign of true repentance is that, when we taste it, we don’t say, “Whew! I’m glad *that’s* over!” Rather, we turn it into a way of life. We are quick to repent in any situation where we are at fault, or where we are criticized and there is some warrant for the criticism. We lose the normal knee-jerk instincts of defending ourselves, explaining ourselves, attacking back, and withdrawing into sullen silence.

Third, in verses 18-19, we see that David’s repentance leads him to think of the needs of his country and society. When he thinks of “the walls,” he is considering the need for a sound and secure city. Many commentators believe that these verses were added years later, between the exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, so that the people using the prayer could link their repentance to a concern for rebuilding their city physically. There are very strong links between repentance and social concern. The humility repentance brings makes us very generous and concerned for people in need. We no longer take a harsh, judgmental attitude toward people who are different from us.

6. What has your experience been with repentance? Does it lead to winsome joy and less sensitivity to criticism, or does it lead to inferiority and increased sensitivity? Why? What have you learned in this study that will be of the most help to you?

7. Read 2 Samuel 12:15-25. Why do you think David's son dies? Is that punishment? What assurance do we have today that God does not punish us for our sins like that?

It would not be right to consider the death of David's son a direct punishment for his sin.

First, Nathan says that God "has taken away your sin" (v. 13). This is a categorical statement. And the follow-up statement is significant: "you are not going to die." The Bible in no uncertain terms says that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 3:23). The death of David's son could not possibly take away his sin.

Second, there are plenty of reasons that it could have been merciful of God to remove this child and take him to be with himself in heaven (see v. 23). Given the circumstances and the enormous guilt David would have had to face concerning this son, he might have made the boy either a terrible idol (as Abraham did to Isaac or Jacob did to Joseph) or he might have found himself hostile or disgusted with the boy.

Third, though David's sin of duplicity sows enormous jealousy and future strife in his family ("the sword will never depart from your house," vv. 10-12) this is more a natural consequence of the sin rather than any kind of *quid pro quo* atonement or payment for sin. Again, family problems could never be payment for sin; only death is payment for sin. This is quite important to notice, however: often the forgiveness of sin does *not* remove the natural and human consequences in earthly life.

Fourth, Nathan says that the death of David's son is a way for God to show the world the seriousness of David's sin. Both Israel (v. 12) and the enemies of Israel (v. 14) think that the Holy God has been treated with contempt by his king. This stroke, and David's willingness to receive it without complaint, gives David an opportunity to show the reality of his change of heart and the reality of God's holiness.

Fifth, we know what David could not know as clearly. How can we be *sure* that David's son did not die for his sins? It is because *God's* Son died for his sins. The sacrifices in the temple (Ps. 51:16) David knows to be only symbolic; they are not in themselves effectual. But what are they symbolic of? We know. We know why, when we sin, that the consequences in our lives may be refining and chastening, but they are never a pay-back. Jesus, God's only Son, died for our sins, so we do not have to, and neither do our sons and beloveds.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 189-194.

² Derek Kidner, p. 189.

³ Derek Kidner, pp. 190-191.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 191.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 192.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 193.

Psalms

Repentance III

Study 9 | Psalm 130

Psalm 130: THE JOYFUL FEAR OF REPENTANCE

- 1. Verses 1-2. (a) What is the psalmist's condition? (What kind of situation does the metaphor "the depths" evoke?) (b) What do verses 1-2 show us is the appropriate response to "the depths"?**

What are "the depths"?

The metaphor of "depths" pictures the speaker drowning or deep under the sea, or possibly deep in a pit or under the earth. If you fall into a pit that is several feet deep, you don't call for anyone. You simply climb out. But if you are fallen or buried deep enough, there is nothing to do but to call for help. Unless you are rescued, you are lost. You cannot save yourself.

Of course, these are *spiritual* "depths." But of what sort? Not until verse 3 are we told directly, but there is already a hint here, when the psalmist says that his cry is a cry for "mercy." The average person trapped in a deep pit would not be calling out for mercy, but simply for rescue! The call for mercy means that he himself is responsible for the depths he is in. Basically, these are depths of guilt and shame. He does not deserve to be rescued, yet he asks for it anyway. He knows that any rescue will be sheer grace and unmerited mercy. Thus "the depths" are his overwhelming sense of guilt, unworthiness, self-blame, and failure.

What is the appropriate response to "the depths"?

The appropriate reaction to spiritual depths is a "cry for mercy," which is a humble yet hopeful response. Any call for mercy (as we have just noted) is a great admission of unworthiness, powerlessness, and sin. Mercy is completely undeserved help. But a call also assumes a willingness on God's part to hear, forgive, and reconcile. It is the very opposite of despair. A completely despondent person would not apply to God for salvation. In summary, the appropriate response to "the depths" is neither despair nor anger, neither self-hatred nor self-confidence. You must grasp at the same moment your complete unworthiness and his irrepressible love for you. That, of course, is the gospel. If you lose hold of one side or the other of gospel truth, you will not get out of the pit. You will either become bitter ("Why doesn't God *do* something?") or hopeless ("I think I'll just stay down here and feel miserable").

- 2. Verses 3-4. (a) What does the rhetorical question of verse 3 teach us about forgiveness? (See Psalm 1:5 and 5:5 to understand the question.) (b) What does the declaration of verse 4 teach us about forgiveness? (How can forgiveness lead to fear?)**

What does verse 3 teach us?

First, it teaches us about the *universal need* for forgiveness. The answer to verse 3's rhetorical question is, obviously, "no one." The psalmist's point is that

every person is such a sinner that *no* one can “stand.” It is important to compare this verse with Psalm 1:5 and Psalm 5:5. To “stand” spiritually means to be acceptable to God in general, or to stand “in the judgment.” So the teaching is not simply that everyone sins. That would be no news to anyone. Rather, the teaching is that “everyone is *lost*”! Everyone. No one is good enough to enter the holy presence of God. When Paul penned his famous words in Romans 3, he taught, “There is no one righteous — not even one” (Rom. 3:10). He quoted Psalm 14:1-3, where David says, “The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. [But] all have turned aside... there is no one who does good, not even one.” Paul could have quoted this verse in Psalm 130 just as effectively to prove that the world is not divided into the “good” people who are going to heaven and the “bad” people who are not. Everyone is lost. No one can pass the test of basic goodness and decency on judgment day.

Second, it teaches us about the *problem* of forgiveness. What makes forgiveness difficult is that sins create a “record,” a residue of liability or obligation. For example, let’s say someone stole something from you or wronged you in some significant way. When he was caught, he might say, “Well, that happened last week. That was all in the past.” You, however, would feel very strongly that the sin against you, though it was not literally written down anywhere, created a continuing debt, liability, or obligation that does not pass away with time. The person who wronged you continues to owe you. Sins create a record; they do not just vanish into the air. The psalmist, then, is saying that our sins create a record with God that would have to be paid up on judgment day. Thus, we would all be lost and condemned. We would all perish in the “payments due” of the record of our sins.

What does verse 4 teach us?

First, this verse teaches us about the *fact* of God’s forgiveness. The psalmist does not say, “There *might* be forgiveness with you” but rather, “There *is* forgiveness with you.” He is saying, “Even though there is a record of sins that would condemn everyone, you find a way to forgive.” Kidner notes that the basis for this redemption is a complete mystery to the writer, even though it is not for us (see Rom. 3:25). “[This] reveals how slight, on the whole, was the assurance of atonement at this stage. A Christian could have looked to the fullness of the ransom rather than [hoping for] the mildness of the reckoning. By the end of the psalm, the writer is doing just this, in relation to Israel; but the basis for the redemption... is still unrevealed to him.”¹

Nevertheless, at the very end of the psalm (see below), the psalmist is given a faint glimpse of how God will be able to deal with the record of our sins.

Second, this verse teaches us the *result* of God’s forgiveness. This is one of the most striking verses in the Bible. The psalmist says that forgiveness, pardon, and grace lead to an increase in the “fear” of the Lord. What does this mean? The “fear of the Lord” is one of the most basic concepts the Old

Testament uses to describe godly character. When God speaks well of Job, he says, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him... a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). The term is used frequently in the Bible, but contemporary readers read it negatively. They almost always think of someone who is trembling and afraid. This verse sheds new light on what it means. Other verses do the same, such as Proverbs 28:14 ("Happy is the [one] who feareth always," KJV) and Psalm 19:9 ("The fear of the Lord is *clean*, enduring forever," KJV). But this verse gives us the clearest view of what the fear of the Lord really is.

The term "fear" certainly must refer at least to a sense of being humbled and overwhelmed by something. But now we see that the "God-fearing" person is not amazed at the prospect of being hurt or abused. The fear of the Lord is not to be "scared of the Lord." Kidner observes, "Servile fear [being scared] would have been diminished, not increased, by forgiveness. ...The true sense of the 'fear of the Lord' in the Old Testament... implies relationship." ²) So this term would be best defined as "joyful awe and wonder before the transcendent greatness of who God is." The fear of God means to be affected deeply by who God is and what he did.

It is especially interesting to realize that this fear is paradoxical. The more we experience grace, forgiveness, and love, the more we get out of ourselves, and the more we bow to him in amazed, wondering submission to his greatness. When we *really* understand that we are forgiven, it does not lead to loose living or independence, but to a respectful surrender to God's sovereignty. Of course, the psalmist's joyful fear could not be as great as ours is. John Newton wrote about it ³:

Let us love and sing and wonder,	Let us wonder; grace and justice
Let us praise the Savior's name!	Join and point to mercy's store;
He has hushed the Law's loud thunder,	When through grace in Christ our trust is,
He has quenched Mt. Sinai's flame;	Justice smiles and asks no more.
He has washed us with his blood,	He who washed us with his blood
He has brought us nigh to God.	has secured our way to God.

The result of God's forgiveness is a paradoxical confidence and humility. Since it is unmerited love, we are both built up and awed into the dust.

3. Verses 5-8. (a) What is the goal of the psalmist's repentance? (b) Why do we "wait" in repentance? How are we to "wait" in repentance?

What is the goal of the psalmist's repentance?

The psalmist says he is waiting for *the Lord*. Ultimately, he is not just seeking reprieve or exemption from punishment. His goal is God himself. His "soul" watches for the reappearance of his Lord. He longs for fellowship and connection.

Why and how are we to wait?

Repentance, then, is not simply asking for a pardon. It is a restoration and deepening of our relationship with God. The believer may be completely sure of the inevitability of pardon (v. 4 indicates no doubts) but he realizes that the restoration of a sense of God's presence may be longer in coming. It is not that God has literally moved away or cut off our salvation. Rather, sin has clouded our experience and assurance of God's love and grace. To wait in repentance is to repent and wait until the soul "sees" God again.

There are at least three ways we can "wait" in repentance indicated here. First, we wait *expectantly*. The image of watchmen waiting for the morning (v. 6) is significant. No matter how long the night seems, morning has always come. Always. This means that God will always return to a repentant soul. Always. Second, we wait *obediently*. The psalmist says that he puts his hope "in his word" (v. 5). That means he takes the promises, summonses, and commands of Scripture and follows them completely. You wait for God by simply obeying fully, no matter how you feel. Third, we wait *in community*. In verses 7-8 he begins to speak to the rest of his people, speaking about the "full redemption" (v. 7) available for "all their sins" (v. 8). What is he doing? He is praising God to and with fellow believers. He is practicing corporate spirituality rather than just individual spirituality. He is ministering to others.

4. Verse 8. What hint does the psalmist get in this last verse about how God will be able to give us such a full forgiveness?

Finally, the psalmist says, "He *himself* will redeem Israel from all their sins." Somehow, God himself will actually come and provide the payment for sin. We know how that happened! Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang about the Christ, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68).

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 446.

² Derek Kidner, p. 446.

³ John Newton, 1774.

Psalms

Repentance IV

Study 10 | Psalm 106

Psalm 106: THE LONG WORK OF REPENTANCE

Introduction

This psalm is a prayer of corporate repentance, unlike the other psalms we have studied. This prayer also differs from most of the other individual repentance psalms in that it makes a detailed and comprehensive catalog of the sins being confessed. This helps us to know what sins to look for when we do our own self-inventory.

1. Verses 4-6. How does the psalmist relate his own personal sins to the sins and prospects of his people? How is this instructive for us?

“This little prayer beautifully relates the one to the many, refusing to lose the individual in the crowd. ...We are reminded... of Paul... whose daily burden was ‘the care of all the churches.’”¹ The psalmist does not want a salvation that ignores the salvation of his brothers and sisters. Notice the balance. He does not say only, “I sinned,” but “we sinned.” He identifies with his people; he shares in their guilt, not only for current sins but even for past sins (v. 6, “even as our fathers did”). Yet he also knows that he will not be automatically forgiven and restored along with his people *unless* he is individually repentant as well (v. 4, “Remember me... when you show favor to your people, come to my aid when you save them”). He knows that he could be saved without them or lost without them — but he also knows that his personal responsibility and sinfulness are connected to theirs.

That is the biblical balance of individual and corporate responsibility. It is reflected in many other places in the Bible. There are many times when a whole family is punished along with an individual offender (see Joshua 7). At other times, God was ready to destroy all of Israel for their sin, but not Moses, their leader (Ex. 32:9-10).

In our highly individualistic Western culture, it is hard for us to understand the biblical balance of corporate and individual guilt. If we are part of a church, a family, an ethnic group, or a country that is doing wrong, we simply distance ourselves and feel no responsibility. The Bible, however, recognizes the many delicate connections between individual and corporate blame. For example, family members often create relational systems in which a chronically irresponsible member is bailed out or shielded from the truth by a conspiracy of silence. Is there no family responsibility in such a case for the deeds of that member? For another example, a white American today may feel no responsibility for the racism of his great-grandfather. Yet he may start life with wealth and privilege he enjoys only because his family grew wealthy on slave labor three generations ago. Has this generation no obligation to give much of

this wealth away? One of the reasons we like the highly individualistic ethos of our society is that it avoids these kinds of knotty ethical questions!

The prayer of verses 4-6 shows us the biblical balance. We are not automatically lost or saved on the basis of our people's sins; we cannot be saved without our own, individual repentance. But we are not to disconnect our consciences too fully or too quickly from the sins of our families and communities.

2. Verses 7-12. What is the first kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

Kidner calls this first fundamental sin "unbelief."² Unbelief begins in rational laziness (v. 7, "they gave no thought... they did not remember"). The two things they did not think of/remember were the miracles of God and the kindness of God (v. 7a, b). However, as a result of failing to think, "they rebelled." The psalmist locates the roots of active sin not just in a stubbornness of will, but in what can only be called a "failure to remember."

The psalmist is not saying that they did not believe that God did the miracles, or that they were acts of great kindness and grace. Rather, they did not "remember," which means that they did not continually reflect on, think out, and *reason from* these great facts into their life patterns. They did not act as if the things they believed were really true. They did not keep their hearts in line with the truth. They did not constantly say, "If he did this for us, and if he is this kind of God, how should we be living? How should we be behaving? How should we be feeling? How should we be viewing this?"

This tendency of the heart to "spiritually forget" — to have truth become spiritually unreal to us — is the main reason we must discipline ourselves to regular prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship. To "spiritually forget" means that the truth no longer controls and affects us. Joshua 4:19-24 describes one way God devised to help Israel remember how they crossed the Jordan by his power. We must devise similar ways.

What are some examples?

- (1) A fundamental form of unbelief is simply prayerlessness and lifelessness in our walk with God. If we are not moved and affected by the things God has done for us, we are "giving no thought" and failing to "remember."
- (2) A more serious form of this sin is "backsliding" itself. This is when we slowly drift away from the vital remembering and practice of the faith, until we find the tenets of Christianity dubious or non-compelling. A

person in the midst of this process may complain of doubts and may think him — or herself the innocent victim of some kind of mysterious faith drain. But C. S. Lewis explains that we often are responsible for this condition.

Now Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reason takes... Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable. This rebellion of your moods against your real self is going to come anyway. That is why Faith is such a necessary virtue: unless you teach your moods "where they get off," you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion. ...As a matter of fact, if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away? ³

In Lewis' analysis, the loss of faith is something we are largely responsible for. The kind of unbelief Lewis is talking about is a stagnation and loss of vitality due to a rational laziness. He is not talking about genuine intellectual problems and doubts with the faith.

(3) In the end, virtually any sin can start with the root of forgetting spiritually what God is or has done for us.

3. Verses 13-15. What is the second kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

Kidner calls this second sin "discontent." ⁴ Verses 13 to 15 briefly recount Israel's complaints about the manna God had given them in the desert (Num. 11). They "began to crave" (11:4) the kind of food they once had in Egypt. God decides to punish them by giving them exactly what they want. "The LORD will give you meat... not... just one day, or two days, or five ...but ...until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it — because you have rejected the LORD... saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (11:18-20). In other words, God punishes them by giving them exactly what they want. They are unsatisfied with God and his provision; they want something more. But God says, "Anything you demand besides the Lord as a requirement for being happy will become poison." They eventually get sick from eating the meat (quails) they crave so much, and many die (v. 33). God gave them the meat they wanted, but he also predicted that they would find the food they wanted unsatisfying and disgusting.

All this is briefly summed up in Psalm 106:13-15. (a) It began with the unbelief of verses 7-13 (“But they soon forgot what he had done,” v. 13). (b) When they began to crave something besides the Lord and his provision (v. 14) they “gave in” to it, rather than “waiting for his counsel” (v. 13a). To “wait for God’s counsel” probably does not mean that they were hoping to get some message. Remember that “to wait” in biblical language means to obey even when it is painful, confusing, and hard to do. In other words, they were sure that they were wiser than God. They insisted that they needed something God said they didn’t need. Ultimately, this means they mistrusted God; they “put him to the test” (v. 14). In spite of what he had done for them (v. 13a), they were sure he was harming them and being unfair to them by not meeting all their needs in the wilderness. John Newton gives us a perfect counterpoint to the discontentment of these people when he writes, “Everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds.”⁵

The final result in Numbers 11 is summed up in verse 15, best expressed by the King James Version, which reads, “He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.” The more you try to fill your emptiness disobediently, the more empty you will become.

Jesus Christ may have had Numbers 11 and Psalm 106 in mind when he confronted the Devil in the wilderness. There Satan offered him bread, but he responded that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). That is almost a paraphrase of Psalm 106:13b. Jesus “waited for the LORD’s counsel” and returned from the wilderness in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What are some examples?

- (1) Whenever we insist that we *have* to sin, that we can’t help it, we are “failing to wait for his counsel.” We are saying we need something else, that we are helpless. But 1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us that God never lets us undergo a temptation (a “wilderness”) that we cannot handle.
- (2) “Discontent” is, in general, an ungrateful life. When the gospel does not give us a continual perspective that “I have so much more than I deserve,” we slide subtly into an attitude of “I’m not getting what I deserve.” So ingratitude and self-pity slowly come from a lack of delight in our unmerited salvation. It leads to a general, perfectionistic pickiness. As writer John Tierney once wryly observed, “For years I knew that my own requirements in a woman were perfectly reasonable — all I wanted was a nice novelist/astronaut with a background in fashion modeling. But I could see that all my *other* friends were way too picky.”⁶

4. Verses 16-18. What is the third kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

This is the sin of envy and jealousy. These verses recount the rebellion against Moses' authority in Numbers 16. The psalmist says that the rebels did not have a legitimate reason for their revolution. They simply envied the authority ("consecration" is to be set apart for leadership) God had given Moses and Aaron (v. 16b).

The Bible commands us to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). Envy, however, does exactly the opposite. It weeps at the success and joy of others because it wants that for itself. It gloats when those we envy are brought down. Envy, then, is pride mixed with anger. The pride says, "I want power, attention, and a good reputation." Anger resents those who have it and tries to steal it or remove it from them.

What are some examples?

- (1) Some examples are very obvious. Sir John Gielgud once acknowledged, "When Sir Lawrence Olivier played Hamlet in 1948, the critics raved. I wept." ⁷
- (2) Often, however, envy hides itself from us. One subtle form of envy is a lack of graciousness and affirmation. Sometimes we are extremely sparing in our compliments because of envy. Another subtle form of envy is a severe skepticism and cynicism, such as is common today among many journalists, who feel the need to tear down or at least be cynical about anyone in a position of power or influence. Another subtle form of envy is simply gossip — the joy of telling others bad news about someone else.

How do Christians tackle envy? They look at its utter opposite — the career of Jesus Christ. Envious people yearn to take from others the glory they have. Jesus Christ yearned to give up, for others, the glory he had (John 17:22-24).

5. Verses 19-23. (a) What is the fourth kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? (b) Verse 23. What is the reason why Israel — and we — are not destroyed by God for our sins? (c) What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

(a) What is this sin?

This is the sin of idolatry. In Paul's famous passage on idolatry (Rom. 1) he quotes from Psalm 106:20: "They exchanged their Glory [God] for an image of a bull, which eats grass." The term for God — "their Glory" — is very telling. Apart from God, we have no honor, significance, or greatness. It is our relationship and service to him that give us significance.

Idolatry is not just one sin among many; it is the root of virtually all other sins. Idols are not usually bad things; they are good things we elevate and look to for the significance and security only Jesus can give. For example, it is good to love your children and want them to love you. If, however, the loss of your children's love means you lose (a) any sense of your own worth, and (b) meaning and hope in life in general, it means you have made your children into idols.

"They *exchanged* their Glory for..." (v. 20): that is the heart of idolatry. If I am shattered by the loss of my money, my looks, or my reputation, it is because I made one of those my glory instead of the Lord. Notice, also, that forgetting God, unbelief, and discontent all stemmed from this idol-exchange (v. 21 after v. 20). We see, then, that unbelief, discontent, envy, and all other sins stem from making something a replacement or substitute for the Lord.

(b) What is the reason why they (and we) are not destroyed?

Verse 23 says that they are not destroyed because there was a Mediator — Moses. Kidner writes, "The bold expression, 'Moses... stood in the breach before him,' accepts the risk of our misunderstanding God's part in the matter, in case we should miss the importance of intercession."⁸ We must remember that God himself inspires and moves Moses to become an intercessor, one who is an advocate for people who deserve judgment. Of course, Moses' intercession is only symbolic. Jesus is the only advocate (1 John 2:1) who can *truly* make a case for why we should be spared. His case is in 1 John 2:2. It goes something like this: "Father, the wages of sin is death. But I have paid those wages in my atoning sacrifice. Now, therefore, I do not simply ask for mercy for my people. I ask for justice (1 John 1:9)! It would be unjust to exact two payments for the same sin. I therefore demand acquittal."

(c) What are some examples of this sin?

Idols have an infinite number of forms. Below is a list of questions to help someone analyze personal idols.

Using "Problem Emotions" to identify idols

- a. Are you *angry* because you are being blocked from something you think is a necessity — when it is not? Write down what that might be.
- b. Are you *fearful* or *badly worried* because something you think is a necessity (when it is not) is being threatened? Write down what that might be.
- c. Are you *despondent*, *hating yourself* because you have lost or failed at something you think is a necessity — when it is not?" Write it down.

Using “Motivational Drives” to identify idols

- a. What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
- b. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to not even want to live?
- c. What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- d. What does my mind go to when I am free? What preoccupies me?
- e. What unanswered prayer would make me think about turning from God?
- f. What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I proudest of?
- g. What do I really want out of life? What would really make me happy?

6. Verses 24-27. What is the fifth kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

The psalmist says that they “despised” the pleasant land and “grumbled in their tents.” This refers to the Israelites’ flat refusal to go in and take the Promised Land (Num. 14). This is not the same thing as the “craving” of verses 13-15. This was a simple lack of passion and desire for the good things God offered them.

Modern Christians seldom discuss this sin, called the sin of sloth in traditional moral theology. Sloth to most people means simply laziness, but in Christian theology it has meant a lack of *zeal*. Dorothy Sayers offers a classic treatment of this sin.

The sixth Deadly Sin is named by the Church *acedia* or sloth. In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of the other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for. We have known it far too well for many years. The only thing perhaps that we have not known about it is that it is mortal sin.

...First, it is one of the favorite tricks of this Sin to dissemble itself under cover of [the other sins]... Gluttony offers a whirl of dancing, dining, sports, and dashing very fast from place to place to gape at beauty spots... Covetousness rakes us out of bed at an early hour in order that we may put pep and hustle into our business; Envy sets us to gossip and scandal... Wrath provides the argument that the only fitting activity in a world so full of evil-doers... is to curse loudly and incessantly... while Lust provides that round of dreary promiscuity that passes for bodily vigour. But these are all disguises for the empty heart and empty brain and empty soul of Acedia.⁹

7. Verses 32-33. What is the sin being confessed here? What examples of this have you have seen in yourself or in others?

This summarizes Numbers 20, when Moses was told to give the Israelites water in the desert by striking the rock. However, he struck the rock in anger (Num. 20:9-12). Moses' self-righteousness and impatience with the people contributed to his loss of temper.

8. Verses 40-48. Why has God saved Israel despite her sins?

- (a) First, we see the *basis* for his continual forgiveness — “his covenant” (v. 45). His promise is the basis for continual pardon and restoration.
- (b) Second, we see the *motive* for his continual forgiveness — “for their sakes” (v. 46). He gets nothing out of our salvation; it is not for his sake, but for ours. This verse cannot overturn the strong theme of the Bible that everything God does is for his own glory. But nothing shows us the glory of God as when he loves us simply because he loves us (Deut. 7:7-8).
- (c) Third, we must remember the reference in verse 23 to God's regard for a mediator (see question #5). As is often the case in the Psalms, the actual *method* of God's salvation and forgiveness is vague or hidden. How can God be just and yet the Savior of sinners? The Old Testament saints could not know the glory of what we know. The covenant (v. 45) of God, like any covenant, has a curse/punishment for those who break it and a blessing for those who keep it. We have broken it, but it is *Christ* who takes the curse for disobedience, so we can receive the blessing of the covenant as if we have obeyed it. That is why Jesus is the ultimate Moses who stood in the ultimate breach before God. Jesus is the reason God can save his people despite their sins. That is why he can love us — not because we are useful to him, not because we merit it, but simply because he loves us.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 378.

² Derek Kidner, p. 379.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1943, 1960), pp. 123-124.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 379.

⁵ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976).

⁶ John Tierney, "Picky, Picky, Picky," *New York Times Magazine*, (February 12, 1995).

⁷ Sir John Gielgud, quoted in Os Guinness, *Steering Through Chaos: Vice and Virtue in an Age of Moral Confusion* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), in the chapter on "Envy."

⁸ Derek Kidner, p. 380.

⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," in *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen, 1947), pp. 84-85.

Psalms

Sorrowing I

Study 11 | Psalm 3

INTRODUCTION

So far, we have looked at two kinds of prayer by looking at two classifications of psalms. First, we looked at *meditation* and studied psalms that were themselves meditations on the person and work of God. Psalm 1 is a meditation on meditation itself! Next, we looked at *repentance* (or what is called “affective prayer”) and studied psalms of contrition and confession of sin.

Now we come to a third major classification of the Psalms that corresponds to a specific kind of prayer. The “Laments” are one of the largest categories of psalms. There are three basic sources of lamentation or grieving in the Psalms. The psalmist may be troubled by (1) his own heart and actions, (2) the hostile, unjust actions of others, and/or (3) the action (or inaction) of God himself. If the main problem is #1, we call it a penitential psalm. But most of the Laments by far are combinations of all three, and quite often there is no confession of sin because the speaker has not brought the troubles on himself at all. In the Laments, we have emotionally realistic and brutally honest wrestlings with the pain and misery of life. The psalmists question God directly on why he is allowing suffering. They struggle mightily with bitterness, paralyzing fear, and despair.

The skill of “praying our troubles” and sorrows is often overlooked as such. When we think of the essential forms of prayer, we think of adoration (and its close cousin, thanksgiving), repenting, and petitioning. Praying our suffering is not a different form of prayer that parallels these. But praising, petitioning, and repenting *in the midst of* suffering is so critical for spiritual growth (and survival!) that it should be considered as a subject on its own. Most of us just stop praying when we are suffering, or put up nothing but the occasional, brief petition asking for relief. But the Lament Psalms show that the right thing to do is to *process* our suffering through sustained prayer.

Psalm 3: HOW TO SLEEP WELL

Introduction

This is the first psalm with a title that links it to David’s life. Second Samuel 15-18 tells the story of David’s son, Absalom, who led a coup to overthrow him as king and kill him.

- 1. Give a name to each of the following sermon sections: verses 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8. What progression do you see through each section? How does the last section give us “tests” by which we can tell we have “triumphed” over suffering, even if we are still grieving?**

The first section has to do with the troubles and sorrows David is facing. You could name it “The Troubles” or “Many Are My Troubles.” (“Many” is a triple refrain.)

The second section is an immediate statement of confidence in what God can do. You could call it “Divine Protection” or “But God Will Answer Me.”

The third section is a description of the *result* of God’s protection and strength. David says that despite enormous troubles (vv. 1-2), the certainty of God’s willing power (vv. 3-4) leads to “Inner Peace.” Or you could keep it first person and call it “So I Can Sleep.”

The fourth section is a call for action from God. You could call it “Arise, O Lord.”

The progression of the psalm is one of increasing confidence and buoyancy. The first section is a plaintive cry for help. The second section progresses to a certainty of *future* refuge and safety only. In this section he remembers that God is sovereign and in control, that he is a prayer-hearing God. Therefore, David does not need to fear for his life. The third section progresses from being assured of future help and protection to asserting *present* peace. Though the deliverance has not yet happened, David experiences “the peace that passes understanding” right now. He sleeps deeply and untroubled.

Finally, the fourth section moves beyond a mere request for personal and individual safety to a call for victory over injustice (v. 7) and a passion for the good and blessing of David’s people (v. 8). We have not really triumphed over suffering if we only deal with it psychologically. Suffering makes us very self-absorbed and keeps us from giving ourselves for others in our community. For David, this new concern for justice and community recaptures his calling as king. Kidner writes, “For David, called to kingship... [personal] refuge is not enough. To settle for less than victory would be virtual abdication; hence the uncompromising terms of verse 7.”¹ Though we are not kings like David, we can see that we have not rebounded from suffering until we have become re-involved in ministry to others and re-involved in community. We should at least notice that David has begun to think this way before his suffering is over. This is one way we come up out of the depths and triumph over grief and trouble. In summary, David is “praying himself confident.” His heart’s progression from fear to peace to boldness to ministry and community is evident.

2. Verses 1-2. What are the two basic ways David's enemies were opposing him? (If you wish, read about Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-18.) How are the troubles you face similar to David's?

What are the two basic ways the enemy opposed David?

First, they are *attacking* him. Verse 1 says they "rise up against me." As we know from 2 Samuel 15-18, a large portion of the populace was literally seeking to kill him. This was not just a small conspiracy (see v. 1a, "how many are my foes"; v. 6a, "tens of thousands drawn up against me"). Second, they were *accusing* him. Verse 2 says that many "are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him.'" It was widely rumored that God had abandoned David and thus he no longer could be king (v. 2). It is likely that the accusations went something like this: "Think of all the terrible things David did: the affair with Bathsheba, the killing of Uriah. No wonder God is fed up with him! He can't be our king any longer." Absalom's supporters would have thought this kind of talk necessary in order to de-legitimize David as king of Israel. So not only were they after his life, but also his reputation and his right to be king. They were attacking his faith and his record, claiming that God had withdrawn from him.

How are your troubles similar?

At first glance, David's troubles seem pretty remote from anything we would face (unless you're the potentate of a small Near Eastern nation!). Today, in the U. S., we are not so likely to have anyone seeking to literally kill us. However, it is quite possible and normal to attract enemies who want to damage our reputation or our standing in the workplace or in the eyes of others. We live in an increasingly mobile and competitive society, where relationships are not based on kinship and tradition but on associations for mutual profit. More than ever, your success can immediately attract jealousy and efforts (overt and covert) to undermine your influence, your power, or your prosperity. You may find very quickly that people you thought were friends have pulled away from you and are poisoning others' opinions of you.

There is a second way in which the general outline of David's two-fold trouble is very, very common to us all. All believers have to deal with *the* Accuser himself — Satan. The name "Satan" means "prosecutor" or "accuser." His job is to accuse Christians — to make them doubt that God can love or care for them. Revelation 12:10 and Zechariah 3:1-6 are examples of Satan's accusations; so is Job 1. Satan may use human beings to shake your confidence in God's commitment to you, or he may attack you directly, psychologically, inflaming your conscience with inappropriate guilt or unrealistic standards, so that you look weak and foolish in your own eyes. In this sense, all Christians *always* have a formidable enemy who is seeking every day to say to us in some way, "God's salvation is not for (or adequate for) you" (i.e., "God will not deliver/save you").

Just as spiritual accusation accompanies the physical attack in David's life, so an assault on your belief in the gospel normally accompanies troubles when they come into your life. It is quite normal to have some major setback in your life and find that it is accompanied by severe doubts about God's love for you or about the legitimacy of your hopes for his care and commitment.

In summary, almost *all* suffering has these same two dimensions to it — the attack and the accusation. On the outside, we have to deal with the trouble itself, which causes worry, anger, or fear. On the inside, we have to renew our faith in the gospel and its message that we are given unmerited, free grace.

3. Verses 3-4. How does David find assurance and confidence in the face of physical attacks? Are we to believe that God will never let anything "really bad" happen to a believer?

The first sentence of verse 3 uses the metaphor of a shield: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD." The preposition the New International Version translates as "around" is very strong, and it can also be translated, "You are a shield that completely covers me." This is not one of the little shields a soldier used in hand to hand combat. It was a full-length shield the size of a door, used to ward off arrows. A soldier held it in front of him as he walked toward a fortress. Literally nothing could get past it to harm the bearer of the shield. Therefore, David has assurance even in the face of literal hordes of attacking enemies.

But what does this promise — that God is a shield around us — really promise? This does not promise that no one will ever be able to do anything to cause us pain or damage. That would not correspond to the history of the saints in the Bible, and especially not with the career of Jesus himself. This cannot be a promise that no one will ever be able to rob us or cheat us or put a weapon to our flesh. What this does promise is that any pain that *does* get through God's protection will only be part of his long-term defense of us. God is always shielding us, whatever happens to us. If we suffer here, it is only to shield us from something far more damaging elsewhere. If we lose something now, it is only to shield us from losing something greater much later. Thus many Christians can testify that an episode of severe suffering led them to see flaws, sins, and a need for God that almost literally saved their spiritual lives.

Perhaps the most vivid example is Job. Satan attacked Job, hoping to destroy Job spiritually as well as materially. God, however, only let as much suffering into Job's life as he needed to grow into the great servant of God Satan wanted to prevent. Another vivid illustration is Joseph (Gen. 37-50). His brothers did what they could to destroy Joseph, and he did suffer greatly. But looking back on his life, Joseph could insist, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). In Joseph's case, God was shielding Joseph and his

brothers *with* the suffering, not just *from* the suffering. Genesis 50:20 is just another way to say, “You, O Lord, in all my suffering, were a shield about me.”

So the promise here is not “God won’t let me suffer.” The promise is, “Even if I suffer, God is shielding me from the intentions of all my enemies and of Satan himself.” See how this leads to peaceful sleep (v. 6)! It is the assurance that “no one can really and truly harm me.” It is the assurance that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28 KJV). If, however, we read Psalm 3:3a as a guarantee that bad things can’t happen to us, the very promise intended to give us peace in all circumstances will be a cause (eventually) for despair and deep anger at God.

4. Verses 3-4, 8. How does David find assurance and confidence in the face of accusation? What makes him think that God will not finally forsake him? How can we know God won’t forsake us? (Hint: Read verse 3 from a Christ-centered perspective.)

What gives David confidence that God won’t forsake him?

The second sentence of verse 3 uses a different metaphor: “You bestow glory on me and lift up my head.” Even without the first clause, the second clause shows that God is giving David dignity and unashamed boldness. To walk with “head held high” even today is a metaphor for healthy pride, a clear conscience, and confidence. This is critical for us when we are accused, as we saw above. Almost always, when we experience a setback, we are shaken in our faith that God really loves us. Our head is down; our eyes are cast down. This doubt may come in one of two ways (and sometimes both). We may feel, “I’m really unworthy. This proves it. God has cast me off and I deserve it.” On the other hand, we may feel, “I did my part, but God has abandoned me. He is not committed to me. This isn’t fair.” The attack leads to accusations of ourselves, God, or both.

But David is confident that God will not and has not forsaken him. He says that God “lifts up his head.” But how? The first clause tells us, even though it is a bit difficult to grasp in the NIV, which says, “But... you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.” The older King James Version was more literal: “But thou, O LORD, art... my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.” Kidner writes, “‘My glory’ is an expression to ponder: it indicates... the comparative unimportance of earthly esteem.”² David realizes that he has allowed his people’s approval and praise to bolster his self-esteem. He walked with head held high because of his acclaim and popularity. Now he asserts the theological truth that God is his only glory. Having God as my King, my Shepherd, and Friend is the only honor that matters. David was downcast because he had made something else his glory besides his relationship with God and God’s love for him.

This is enormously important as we learn how to “process” our suffering. When something is taken from us, our suffering is real and valid. But often, inside, we are disproportionately cast down because the suffering is shaking out of our grasp something we allowed to become more than just a good thing to us. It had become too important spiritually and emotionally. We looked at it as our honor and glory, the reason we could walk with our heads up. We may have told others that “Jesus is my Savior. His approval, and his opinion of me, and his service are all that matter.” But functionally, we got our self-worth from something else. In suffering these “something elses” get shaken. In David’s case, most of his suffering was perfectly valid. To be falsely accused and lose the love of your son and your people brought searing pain. But he also realized that he had let popular opinion and “earthly esteem” become too important to him. By recommitting himself to finding God as his “glory” — something that can only be done in prayer, through repentance and adoration — we see him growing into buoyancy and courage.

[Note: It is possible to read verse 3 as adoration based in repentance. To fill it out, David is saying, “But *you* are a shield around me, O LORD — not any other thing! And *you* are my glory and the lifter of my head — not these others! Not my record or political power or even my son’s love or my people’s acclaim — only you!” That is praise, but grounded in repentance.]

How does God become our glory? The NIV indicates the answer when it uses the word “bestow.” Our relationship with God is a gift; it is bestowed. The only answer to the Accuser is the gospel of free grace. If we hear the accusation, “God will not save *him*; he is unworthy,” the only answer is that salvation is not for the worthy, but for the humble — those who *admit* they are unworthy. This is directly stated in verse 8: “From the LORD comes deliverance (salvation).” This is identical to the famous declaration of Jonah: “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:9). We do not save ourselves — it is unmerited. Therefore, God’s grace will not abandon us.

David had an intuitive grasp that we are saved by grace. He realized that no lasting glory or salvation comes through earthly accomplishments. If we look to them for salvation, we will be disappointed, for “from the *LORD* comes salvation.” He reoriented himself to the freeness of grace, and realized that God’s support was not ultimately based on his accomplishments.

How can we know that God won’t forsake us?

If we read verse 3 from a Christ-centered perspective, we see that we have a much more specific way to deal with accusation than did David.

First, in Christ, we see how the Lord becomes very literally “our shield.” A shield protects us by taking the blows that would have fallen upon us and destroyed us. It protects us through *substitution*. Jesus, of course, stood in our place and took the punishment we deserved. This is why Satan’s accusations

are overcome by the blood of Christ. (See Revelation 12:10-11.) We know God won't forsake us because he forsook *Jesus* for our sin. Jesus cried out, "My God — why have you forsaken me?" as he was punished for us. God cannot get two payments for your sin. Therefore, he cannot forsake you.

Second, in Christ we are "holy and blameless in his sight" (Col. 1:22), despite our spotty record. Christians, then, know that Christ is *literally* our glory and honor before the Father. If we have that, we are not overthrown by accusation. That is why an old hymn goes:

Well may the Accuser roar
Of sins that I have done.
I know them all, and thousands more —
Jehovah knoweth none.³

If I can remember how God sovereignly and providentially processes my suffering for my good (v. 3a, as "shield") and if I can remember my imputed perfect righteousness in Christ (v. 3b, as "glory" and "lifter"), I will be able to sleep well anytime (v. 5)!

5. In what ways can a Christian pray against enemies as David does in verse 7? In what ways can we not do so? (Read Romans 12:17-21.)

In the introduction to this series, we spoke briefly about the prayers in the Psalter against enemies (the imprecatory psalms). It would be important to recap that here.

On the one hand, calls to God for justice in the world are absolutely right. They remind us how important God's holiness and justice are. So we must not recoil and dismiss prayers like Psalm 3:7 as primitive and unworthy. We should long for justice to be done and for wrongdoers to be prevented from doing evil. This is a longing for social justice. In addition, we as Christians can also pray and rail against the "powers and principalities" that are evil forces behind many of the destructive and exploitative political, economic, cultural, and philosophical systems of the world.

However, on the other hand, we know that the psalmists did not understand fully the work of Christ on the cross. The cross reveals several things. First, if God brought judgment, he would count *all* sins (Ps. 130:3-4) and we would all be lost. But second, he poured out his judgment instead on Jesus Christ. This means, as Kidner notes, that we live in a time of greater mercy that will be followed by greater judgment. "The psalmists in their eagerness for judgment call on God to hasten it; the gospel by contrast shows God's eagerness to save, but reveals new depths... of judgment [later] which are its corollary. 'Now they have no excuse for their sin.'" ⁴ In other words, the gospel humbles us (showing us that we were only saved by grace) and leaves a period of grace in which people can repent of wrongdoing and find that same grace. However,

because evil must have a solution, there will still be a judgment day. On that day, either Christ's work will be revealed as paying for our sins, or we will pay for our own.

Until that day, the gospel's logic compels us to pray for our enemies and wish them good, even if we are opposing their deeds. We cannot feel superior to them nor hope that they *personally* will pay for their sins, when we have only by grace been exempted from paying for our own. We also know that God, in the end, will not let evil prevail, whether people repent or not. Kidner writes:

We conclude, then, that it is not open to us to renounce or ignore the psalmists, part of whose function in God's economy was to make articulate the cry of "all the righteous blood shed on earth" (to borrow our Lord's phrase). But equally it is not open to us to simply occupy the same ground on which they stood. Between our day and theirs... stands the cross. We are ministers of reconciliation, and this is a day of good tidings... As men in need, who may yet be rescued, [our enemies] are to be loved and sought; as men who have injured us, they must be forgiven. But as men to follow... they are to be rejected utterly, as are the principalities and powers behind them. ⁵

6. What have you learned in this psalm that can help you "pray your difficulties" better?

Take time to consider which of the insights you received from this psalm were the most important and relevant to you.

Some of the principles you may have distilled include:

1. Suffering does not have to end in order for a person to regain his footing and confidence. David's circumstances have not changed by the time he reaches verse 8. Instead of waiting for our circumstances to improve, we need to "pray our difficulties." We need to process them by prayer.
2. One source of confidence and comfort in suffering is the promise that God in his sovereignty shields us in and even *with* our trouble. We must pray this concept "real" to ourselves to gain strength. We can meditate on examples of it (Gen. 50:20).
3. Another source of confidence and comfort in suffering is the assurance that God will not forsake us. Trouble always casts a shadow on our faith in God's love. We need to re-orient ourselves in prayer to the original graciousness of God's support. We can do this by praying, "Lord, I know you won't forsake me. You forsook Jesus and punished him for my sins so that you can stand with me now."

4. Another way to process our suffering is to recognize that some good earthly things may have become too important to us and have functioned as our "glory." Our identity is wrapped up in them. Suffering threatens them and gives us an opportunity to make Christ our *true* glory. In prayer, we look at such things and say, "I don't need you to survive if I have him."
5. We have not really dealt with suffering if we are only individually at peace. We are to come out of suffering more prepared than ever to minister to others and participate in community. Therefore, one way to process suffering is *not* to pull out of community during trouble.

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 55.

² Derek Kidner, p. 54.

³ Anonymous.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 29.

⁵ Derek Kidner, pp. 31-32.

Psalms

Sorrowing II

Study 12 | Psalms 42 and 43

Psalms 42 and 43: ON LOSING AND FINDING GOD

Introduction

Psalm 3 was an example of how to pray through outright persecution and accusation. Now we come to a pair of psalms that describe a somewhat different situation. Nearly all commentators believe that Psalm 42 and 43 were one psalm originally, and should be read together as such. A quick reading of the two psalms will confirm this conclusion. We will study them as a single unit.

1. Psalm 42:1-2. What condition is the psalmist experiencing? If the writer himself is likened to a deer, what do the dried up “streams” represent?

Three times the psalmist says that he is “downcast” (42:5, 11; 43:5). This is a general word for being despondent or depressed. More specifically, though, he describes his condition as severe *spiritual dryness*. The condition is conveyed by the image of a deer dying of thirst (42:1). Deer are creatures of instinct, and they drink constantly. They would only be parched and deeply thirsty if there was a drought. (All these psalmists lived in an arid climate where drought was a constant threat. They had all seen dazed and dying animals staggering about in unusually dry seasons.)

If, then, the author represents himself as a deer, it is God who is represented by the dried-up streams. Or, rather, it is the experience and presence of God that is “gone.” Of course, God is omnipresent and there is no place he does not exist. But when the psalmist calls not for God in general, but (v. 2) for the “living” God, he is bemoaning the loss of God’s reality to his soul. When he asks, “Where is God?” he is not talking intellectually (as some skeptics do) but experientially. He is not saying he doesn’t believe in him. (That would be much easier!) He *does* believe in God, but he can’t *feel* the living God — the God we can “go and *meet*” (v. 2). There is no meeting with God, no sensing of God in his life.

To clearly identify this condition, we should notice two factors that are not mentioned anywhere in the psalm. First, there is no confession of sin or repentance. As we have seen before, often there is a loss of fellowship with God that stems from guilt. But the dryness experienced here is not the result of a bad conscience. Second, there does not appear to be any major tragedy for which the psalmist is asking God, “WHY?” As we will see in Psalm 73 and elsewhere, often there is a loss of fellowship when the ways of God become

inscrutable and when he seems to be unjust. But the dryness here is not the direct result of some terrible injustice or suffering. Not only that, though the “enemy” is mentioned twice (42:9; 43:2), the singular form of the noun makes this a much more general factor than “enemies” were in Psalm 3. It does not appear that the psalmist is fleeing for his life or experiencing a major external threat and danger.

In summary, the condition is severe spiritual dryness, the loss of a sense of God’s reality and presence. This does not have to be the result of some unconfessed sin or some terrible trouble or upheaval in one’s life. Some older writers used to call this “spiritual desertion.” It is not necessarily an aspect of guilt, worry, fear, or anger. One of the values of this psalm is that it isolates spiritual dryness as a distinguishable spiritual condition in its own right.

2. Since the cause was not sin or suffering, what elements appear to have triggered his condition? Look through the entire psalm (that is, both Psalms 42 and 43). How does each “trigger” factor apply to you today?

As we just said, the two most typical causes of spiritual dryness — guilt and tragedy — do not appear to be present. However, there do appear to be other factors associated with this condition. They might be better described as the “occasions” for the dryness rather than the ultimate cause. A “trigger” may bring out or bring to a head something that was brewing anyway. There are three possible triggers evident in the psalm.

First, we see evidence of **disruption of community and worship**. The author appears to have been moved some distance from the temple and the congregation of people who worshiped there. He remembers having gone to the house of God with the multitude (42:4), but now he lives far away, in the north near the mountains of Hermon and Mizar (42:6). This does not mean, of course, that he is superstitious, believing that he can’t pray or experience God where he is. But his normal setting for worship and the fellowship of believing friends have been taken from him.

Practical application: It is typical to find ourselves “drying up” spiritually when we are removed from a church community in which we experienced God’s presence and grew spiritually. This is a trigger rather than a cause, since such moves and separations are normal, and not something that can be undone or “fixed.” They bring dryness for two reasons. On the one hand, a normal disruption from Christian community can reveal weakness in our prayer life and relationship with God. We may have lived off the environment and the spiritual energy of others rather than developing our own, personal fellowship with God. In this sense, disruption of fellowship reveals inadequacies in our own walk with God. On the other hand, *no* one is able to maintain fellowship with God based on individual prayer alone. In our individualistic modern culture, Christians

tend to underestimate the importance of being deeply incorporated into a believing community. If we are removed from our home community, we are bound to feel disoriented until that is reestablished. In this sense, the dryness is as natural as real thirst. A sustained failure to establish a close connection to a worshiping community can have a devastating effect on us spiritually. Many Christians today have lifestyles that isolate them, making it impossible to be part of regular corporate worship and/or intimate community. But without these things, God can become unreal and you can become spiritually dry.

Second, we see the weariness of **living in a skeptical, spiritually hostile environment**. The author is being worn down by those who question the reality or the power of the biblical God. They continually ask him, "Where is your God?" (42:3, 10). There are difficulties and traps that attend *any* society in which believers live. If we live in a society that reflects biblical moral values, there is a danger of Pharisaism and complacency. But when we live in an unbelieving environment day in and day out, the hostility may wear us down. This is not the same thing as out-and-out persecution, as in David's case. It means that when we identify ourselves as believers in a culture that considers belief silly or dangerous, the relentless debates, suspicion and lack of support can drain us and lead to spiritual dryness.

Practical application: In a secular environment like a Northeastern U. S. city, we may find family and friends very puzzled by our faith. When we identify ourselves publicly as believers, it exposes us and makes us vulnerable to people who question our faith profoundly. Some examples: (a) When God's ways are inscrutable, such as when the good suffer and the wicked prosper, people come and say, "If you have a good God, why did this happen?" (b) When the church or professing Christians act in wicked or stupid ways (notice the psalmist's "plead my cause against an ungodly nation," 43:1) then the believer is exposed to ridicule. People may say, "If your God is so good, why are his so-called people so stupid and bad?" Sometimes we are beaten down spiritually when we are surrounded by hostile questions we can't answer, day after day. It is also spiritually draining when we are surrounded by believers or churches that are far from what they should be.

Third, we see evidence of **a lack of a sense of usefulness**. The writer appears to be a musician. The heading indicates that the writer of the psalm had written it for "the director of music." In 42:4 he remembers that he used to *lead* the throng into the temple. This means that the author may be a man who is (for some reason that is unclear) unable to use his gifts in the ministry he desires. He has been moved to a place where he can't practice worship leading or perhaps music. This proves that we cannot maintain spiritual vitality simply through prayer, or through community and corporate worship. It is not enough to simply have spiritual "input" — we also need spiritual "output." We must also serve others and sense that we are being used in their lives.

Practical application: This factor is similar (and probably linked) to the disruption of fellowship and worship. It is typical to find ourselves drying up spiritually when we are removed from a church community where people recognized our gifts and we felt God working through us.

Despite the identification of these factors, there is no simple solution to this condition. Often the factors that trigger dryness are things that are out of our control. Spiritual dryness is caused by a very complex, mysterious mixture of underlying spiritual weakness and the normal disruptions and weariness of life.

We need to keep this in mind, because in today's Christian community, dryness and despondency are often said to be caused by something *you* have done wrong or could be doing right to "fix" it. This may be a result of our technological society, in which everything must have a solution. The more conservative Christian may tend to look for some sort of behavioral failure, insisting that repenting and obeying is the solution to the dryness. The more liberal Christian may look for some sort of psychological difficulty, insisting that therapy is the solution to the dryness. No one wants to talk about enduring a condition and growing through it. By "enduring" we do not mean resentful resignation but, rather, wise engagement.

This leads us to ask, "What do we do in this situation? How do we meet the challenge of spiritual dryness in a way that leads us to grow and not weaken spiritually?"

3. What does the psalmist do to face this condition? Look through the entire psalm.

Though spiritual dryness may not be the result of sin, we may still handle it sinfully. We may blame ourselves and convince ourselves that there is something wrong with us. (That is to lose faith in the gospel, and fall into "accusation." See the study of Psalm 3.) Or we may become bitter against God. Or we may leave the path of obedience because God is not real to us anymore. We may find comfort and solace in sinful pursuits. These are all very easy, because the triggers are not causes, and so we cannot easily fix our situation. What does the psalmist do?

First, **he pours out his soul** in 42:1-4. Notice that despite his complaint that God is not real, he is praying an enormously intense, sustained, and eloquent prayer! Therefore, the first thing we see that he does is to pray — even though he doesn't feel anything. But his prayers are not just a mantra — "Help me, help me, help me." He is "pouring out his soul" to God. What does that mean? (a) To "pour out the soul" means to get into one's own heart. Yes, it is an ancient and healthy version of what is sometimes now called "getting in touch with your feelings." It means to look honestly at your doubts, desires, fears, and hopes. (b) However, it is not abstract self-examination, but rather a prayer. It is exposing one's inner self to God. It is crying, longing, reflecting,

remembering — all before God. (c) Lastly, of course, it means simply calling to God. As we look through the psalm, we see many honest, direct statements of confusion and frustration. But nevertheless he prays — in a sustained, focused way.

Second, he does **self-dialogue**. Perhaps the most remarkable thing we see in the psalm is that the psalmist does not only talk to God, but he speaks to himself. He preaches to his “soul,” to his heart. Three times, in 42:5, 11, and 43:5, he speaks to his self (“O my soul”). This is a critical skill. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments,

The first thing we have to learn is what the Psalmist learned — we must learn to take ourselves in hand. ...He is talking to himself, he is addressing himself. [It is important to see that this is not the same as] morbidity and introspection... We must talk to ourselves instead of allowing ‘ourselves’ to talk to us... [In] spiritual depression... we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I just trying to be deliberately paradoxical? Far from it. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? ...So he stands up and says: “Self, listen for a moment.”

...Then you must go on to remind yourself of God, who God is, and what God is and what God has done and what God has pledged himself to do. Then... end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: ‘I shall yet praise Him... for [he] is... my God. ¹

Third, he **analyzes his hopes**. In these three self-dialogues, he does not simply talk to himself. He also questions himself. He asks, “*Why* are you cast down”? and then immediately tells his soul to “put your hope in God.” This must mean that the reason he is cast down is that he has not put his hope in God.

This is very similar to David’s reminder to himself (in Psalm 3:3) that God is his glory — not his record or his son’s love or his people’s acclaim. Though spiritual dryness and darkness are not the direct result of sin, they usually reveal to us inordinate loves and false hopes. Sometimes these counterfeit hopes are shaken. For example, what if this was a talented musician who thought he was living for God, but realizes he was living for the acclaim of leading worship before a large congregation? To some degree, we are all guilty of putting our hope too little in God. We must take time in spiritual dryness to analyze our hopes. In a sense, this man may be grabbing hold of his soul and saying, “Soul — your music should not be your hope. *God* is your hope.”

Fourth, **he remembers and meditates on who God is and what he has done**.

Verse 5b is very telling. He says, “My soul is downcast... *therefore* I will remember.” He meditates on God’s love at night. He realizes that the waves that have gone over him are “your” waves and billows (42:7). Even when he questions God, he calls him “my Rock” (42:9) and “my stronghold” (43:2). So he is meditating on God’s name and attributes, and how God has shown him love throughout his life. (42:8: “By day the LORD directs his love, at night his

song is with me — a prayer to the God of my life.”) Verse 8 does not simply represent “pouring out the soul.” This is a deliberate attempt to remember how God has lovingly guided and directed his life. He is deliberately recalling all God’s goodness to him.

Fifth, and finally, he **turns to God’s truth and light to lead him home.** It is possible that the psalmist in 43:3-4 is simply expecting God to release him to go back to Jerusalem, to the “holy mountain” of Zion and the temple. But Kidner thinks that he is instead realizing that he will be able to experience the ravishing presence of God in geographical exile.

To be led home by God’s light and truth could mean being brought back from exile by the One who displays these qualities, but it is a rather indirect way of saying it. It seems at least a possible meaning that, given this light and truth, [he] can enjoy even in exile the very blessings of God’s *holy hill* and *altar*. The Psalms often speak of such spiritual equivalents of the outward [temple] means of worship: e.g. 50:13f; 51:17; 141:2. ²

In other words, the psalmist realizes that God’s illumining power (“light”) working through his Word and “truth” can give him the reality of God’s presence. Thus, “outwardly, nothing has changed: but he has won through.”

4. “The ultimate cause of spiritual dryness is God. Sometimes God allows us to experience dryness as a way to strengthen and grow us.” Do you agree with this statement? Could you share an example from your own life?

John Newton writes that it is important for us to experience times of dryness. He writes about “A,” a new Christian with lots of joy and experience of God’s presence in prayer, and “B,” a spiritually dry Christian who is being strengthened and matured by God through the dryness.

When he is... young in the knowledge of the Gospel... his heart is enlarged in prayer [or when listening to sermons or reading, and the Bible is applied to his heart by the Holy Spirit] with power and sweetness. He mistakes the nature and design of these comforts, which are not given him to rest in.He thinks he is then right [with God] *because* he has them. ...Then his mountain stands strong. But ere long he feels a change: his comforts are withdrawn; he finds no heart to pray. ...Then he is at his wit’s end... He sighs for mercy, but fears that justice is against him. However, by these changing dispensations, the Lord is training him up, and bringing him forward [to give him an] abiding sense of his acceptance in the Beloved... notwithstanding... the prevalence of a legalistic spirit [in him]... By a further discovery of the glorious Gospel, it shall be given him to know his acceptance, and to rest upon the Lord’s finished work for salvation.

...The Lord appoints occasions and turns in life which try our spirits. There are particular seasons when... he is pleased to withdraw, and to permit Satan's approach, that we may feel how [weak] we are in ourselves. We are prone to spiritual pride, to self-dependence, to vain confidence, [to attach our hearts to created things]... He... shows us... how unable we are to stand without him. ['B'] learns to be more distrustful of his own heart. ...The dark and disconsolate hours... make him doubly prize the light of God's countenance." ⁴

Newton is saying that we tend to base our assurance of our justification on our sanctification. That is, we tend to think that God accepts us because of the love-to-God in our hearts. In reality, what love there is in our hearts to God is only there as a result of our acceptance in Christ and his work in us. The newer Christian has no other way to learn this than through trials and times of dryness. Only then can we slowly come to see that our acceptance is based completely on Christ's work, not the love and grace in our hearts. We sing about this in one old hymn, "The Solid Rock":

I dare not trust the sweetest frame (of heart)
But wholly lean on Jesus' name. ⁵

Spiritual dryness is, in the end, simply a test. When it comes upon us, it is something like weight-lifting. If we press the weights, we get stronger; if we drop the weights, we get injured. We are therefore going to either become better or worse due to the weights — but we will not remain the same!

5. What have you learned in these psalms that can help you "pray your difficulties" better?

¹ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 20-21.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 167-168.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 168.

⁴ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), pp. 16, 18, 22.

⁵ Edward Mote, "The Solid Rock," 1834.

Psalms

Sorrowing III

Study 13 | Psalm 126

Psalm 126: DON'T WASTE YOUR SORROWS

Introduction

The background of this psalm is an understanding of “streams in the Negev” (v. 4). The Negev was the desert in the southernmost part of Judah. There, for most of the year, everything was arid and all riverbeds were dry. But the rare sudden downpour in the mountains could turn the dry gully into a rushing river and turn the desert “into a place of grass and flowers overnight.”²

1. What do you think was the “great thing” God did for the people of Israel in verses 1-3?

We don’t know exactly what great deliverance is referred to in verses 1-3. Some think it was the return from the Babylonian exile. But, despite the phrase “captives,” it could just as well have been a deliverance from some other major “famine or siege, captivity or plague.”³ (The terminology of “captives” could embrace a range of situations beyond a literal imprisonment or exile.) Whatever it was, it was obviously an act of God and widely seen as such by all “the nations” (v. 2). Those who went through it felt that all their dreams had come true (v. 1: “we were like men who dreamed”).

2. Despite the tremendous help God has given them in the past, Israel is now desolate (vv. 4-6) and in desperate need of his help again. What does this teach us?

This teaches us that a life of faith is inevitably one of both rejoicing and weeping. Despite a great deliverance from God in the past, so great that it was beyond people’s wildest dreams and beyond what they dared ask for (v. 1), here they are again in deep grief. Despite all the great things God can do for you in this life, he does not take you out of the world of troubles or give you unbroken joy in life.

In some ways, the psalm itself is a map of the Christian life with regard to rejoicing and weeping. Quantitatively, there are three verses of joy and three verses of weeping. Yet qualitatively, joy is the ground note and has the final word. Christians are people who do more of *both* weeping and laughing than others. We weep more than others because we see people who are ignorant and lost, because we know how much sin grieves God, and because we see more evil and sin in our hearts than others do. Yet we rejoice more than others because we know that our bad things will work out for good (Rom. 8:28), our good things (adoption, justification, salvation) will never be taken away from us

(Rom. 8:31-38), and the best things are yet to come (1 Cor. 2:9). If we are always totally self-controlled, if we never weep or exult, then we do not truly follow the Lord, who was a weeper and an exulter, a mourner and a singer. His first miraculous sign was to make a high-spirited party even more so with terrific wine (John 2). Yet he was “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53).

3. Verses 5-6. What does the psalmist teach us when he likens weeping to “sowing”? What do you think is the difference between just weeping and “going out... sowing” with tears?

This is a vivid illustration. Sowers were workers who went out into the fields in the morning, carrying large bags of seed. They scattered the seed carefully and distributed it evenly in order to see a crop come up in due season. Obviously, they did not see any results immediately, nor for a long time. Eventually, however, their sowing produced a harvest.

Whatever God’s deliverance was in verses 1-3, it is completely gone by verses 4-6. The prosperity, freedom, or security has been taken away, and the prayer is “restore us” (v. 4)! Now is a time of weeping, grief, and suffering. But when the psalmist associates the slow sowing of seed with weeping and tears, he suggests that there is a way to weep that bears fruit. It is inevitable in this world that we should weep, but do we *sow* in our weeping? Do we waste our tears or do we know *how* to weep? If a sower were to simply dump all his seed in one spot, there would be no harvest. So to simply grieve will not produce growth or fruit in your life or in others. You must “go out” weeping. The suggestion here is that, in your grieving, you must do some sort of work — a “grief work.” It may mean that you continue in your duties to family, to friends, to other believers, to the world. It may mean that you process your grief in prayer, as we studied in Psalms 3 and 42-43. At any rate, to “go out weeping, carrying seed to sow” means something more than just crying and grieving. The writer is saying, “Don’t waste your sorrows — use them.”

The poetic imagery is, of course, not precise. The idea is that either the farmer is watering the seed with tears, or the tears themselves are the seed. But poetry is not supposed to be precise. It is designed to evoke, suggest, and point. What is evoked is that tears must not be wasted, but shed in a way that offers the possibility of fruitfulness and growth.

4. If you did not already discuss this under #3, how can sorrow for a believer be used to produce joy, even as sowing produces a harvest? Read 2 Corinthians 4:17 and read verse 6 from a Christ-centered perspective.

Another implication of the “sowing” illustration is a startling one.

There are many places in the Bible where God promises, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5 KJV). This teaching is that sorrow will give way to joy. God will come through for you eventually. Right will triumph. Just be patient. But here in Psalm 126 we see something deeper envisioned: there is a sorrow that *produces* joy. Sowing seed does not simply give way to reaping, it actually produces reaping. In the Lord, grief and tears properly “sown” will actually produce joy.

Paul is the most explicit about this. In 2 Corinthians 4:17 he writes, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving [i.e., producing] an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” See — afflictions will not just give way to glory but they PRODUCE it! How could that be? The answer for a Christian is much clearer than it could have been for the psalmists.

First, in the central event in history of the world, Jesus’ suffering did not just give way to joy, it produced it. His agony and weeping were substitutionary. He took our punishment. Thus his weeping was the ultimate sowing in tears, and produced the ultimate reaping in joy. His tears and blood redeemed us. Second, now (Paul says) we Christians realize that our own suffering, while not substitutionary, follows a similar pattern. Thinking of *his* sowing tears and reaping joy, we now will weep and grieve differently.

- (a) We won’t grieve in unresolved guilt. (“I know that though I’m suffering, God is not abandoning me, since Jesus was abandoned *for* me on the cross.”)
- (b) We won’t grieve in deep self-pity and anger. (“I know that he took far worse grief on himself than I will ever know, undeservedly – and all for me! So I can bear this smaller amount of suffering for him.”)
- (c) We won’t grieve impatiently. (“I know his suffering and death did not make sense to his followers, and this suffering does not make sense to me. But God, you were working in *that* to bring joy and redemption, and somehow I know you are working in this.”)

By watching how his tears produced joy, we will be able to avoid having our griefs crush us, embitter us, and destroy us. And thus, our griefs will produce in us character, patience, humility, love, and wisdom (Rom. 5:1-5). In other words, our tears and sufferings (if they are borne with an eye toward him) will produce Christ-likeness in us.

As we have said, this is far easier for us as Christians who have seen the ultimate sowing-in-tears in Jesus. But here the prophetic, inspired vision of the writer bursts the boundaries of what he knows and he says, "Our tears are seeds of joy that will definitely produce a joyous harvest."

5. Verses 4-6. Why does the psalmist employ two such different metaphors to explain how God can "restore our fortunes"?

The two metaphors are startlingly different. When the "streams of the Negev" (v. 4) are flowing, it is due to a flash flood. Grass and flowers spring up overnight. When the "sower goes out weeping" (vv. 5-6), we see a very slow process of watering the seed in tears. This is painstaking and long-term. Though verse 4 is a prayer that God will turn our tears into joy quickly, verses 5-6 tell us that, though they are certain, the songs of joy may take a long time to come.

Kidner believes that the two images are not contradictions. "The two images of renewal (4b, 5-6) are not only striking: they are complementary. The first of them is all suddenness, a sheer gift from heaven; the second is slow and arduous, with man allotted a crucial part to play in it."⁴ In other words, he does not see these as two different ways God answers prayer for renewal in times of difficulty. From one perspective, we have a lot of work to do: painstaking, slow obedience, waiting, and prayer. On and on time goes, and there is no apparent answer or progress. But when the answer comes, it is seen to be all a "sheer gift" — sheer grace. And it is.

"So the psalm, speaking first to its own times, speaks still. Miracles of the past it bids us treat as measures of the future; dry places as potential rivers; hard toil and good seed as the certain prelude to harvest."⁵

6. What have you learned in this psalm that can help you "pray your difficulties" better?

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 440.

² Ibid.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 439.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 439.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 440.

Psalm

Sorrowing IV

Study 14 | Psalm 73

Psalm 73: THE PROBLEM OF INJUSTICE

Introduction

This is one of the most famous of the Lament Psalms, and it represents one of the key themes of the Old Testament. The writer (Asaph) sees that the wicked thrive while many apparently good and innocent people suffer. Many of the Lament Psalms, as well as the book of Job and much of the book of Jeremiah, are taken up in anguished questions about why God seems to allow evil, injustice, and unfair suffering to happen continuously. In this psalm, the author wrestles with severe doubts and anger about the ways of the world. The Bible is fiercely realistic about the injustice and contradictions of real life. It does not give us a sentimental picture of things. It does not lead us to believe that life will be fair. But how do we deal with our doubts, confusion, and anger as we survey life and history?

1. Verses 4-12. What was the “all this” the psalmist saw that almost overthrew him?

The “all this” (v. 16) the psalmist saw was “the prosperity of the wicked.” In verses 4-14 he enumerates the kind of life the rich, famous, and powerful were leading:

- They have healthy, sleek bodies (v. 4).
- They have great freedom of choice, unencumbered by the difficulties, duties, and necessities that limit others (v. 5).
- They are proud and arrogant, and abuse their power over others (v. 6).
- They are callous, cynical, and hard. They can’t imagine good for others and society, but are ingenious designing new ways to increase their own power, image, and pleasure (v. 7).
- Their words and speech are cutting, scornful, and haughty. They boast and brag (vv. 8-9).
- Yet they are highly popular and the populace cannot give them enough attention. They fascinate and attract people (v. 10).
- They are proudly irreligious and secular. They mock faith and the idea of a holy God who can judge (v. 11).
- They make money without effort. Wealth comes to them (v. 12).

This seems to be an astonishingly up-to-date picture of our own classes of rich, famous, “A-list” people in Manhattan. We are confronted with the fact that every society in every century has had its elites, many of whom carried their privilege in oppressive, unjust, and selfish ways. Asaph sees that the “prosperity of the wicked” is not just a temporary blip in history, but the settled pattern of the world. Pride and self-promotion and ruthless, manipulative behavior tend to pay off with economic and social success. And it is a simple fact of history that most societies at most times have been controlled by a small, powerful group of elite classes that rule for their own gain rather than for the people as a whole. Injustice is and has been normal for most people in most places in the world at most times in history.

How does that square with the concept of a “good” God (v. 1)? Real life seems to mock the assertion of verse 1, that God is a just God.

2. What spiritual condition resulted? (The psalmist describes it in verses 2, 16, 21.)

When he admits that “my feet had almost slipped, I nearly lost my foothold” (v. 2), he is saying that he almost gave up his faith. The image is one of being in a precarious and dangerous situation. A “foothold” is not the way you talk about normal steps in a walk. You only need a foothold if you are climbing something. If you are climbing up a mountain and you put your foot on a piece of rock or turf that cannot hold you, your feet begin to slip and you are on the verge of falling down to injury or death. At one point the Bible describes eternal destruction as “their foot will slip” (Deut. 32:35). This image, then, means that Asaph was on the verge of abandoning his faith in God altogether. He was on the verge of losing everything — the complete destruction of his faith and spiritual life.

What led him to this precipice? First, *perplexity*. Verse 16 tells us that this near abandonment of the faith came from severe perplexity. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me” (v. 16). What he saw was completely confusing. He had no answers for the way the world was going. It did not seem to square with the goodness and holiness of God. These questions raised all kinds of doubts about God. He was “oppressed” by unanswered questions that arose from his survey of the world around him. He could not live with a lack of “understanding.” Second, there was *bitterness* against God. Verse 21 said that his soul was “embittered.” What he saw led him to anger and resentment. “Why was God allowing it? Why couldn’t God stop it?” was the language of his heart. He had begun to get very angry at God for the injustice he saw in the world.

In summary, deep, unanswered, intellectual questions and internal anger had filled him with so many doubts about God that he was ready to abandon the faith completely.

3. Verses 3, 13-14. The first stage out of his anger and doubt is an honest view of his own motives and attitudes. What does he admit about the roots of his resentment in these verses?

In verses 13-14, Asaph takes an honest look at the self-centeredness that is mixed in with his righteous indignation.

We all know that it is an unjust world, filled with oppression, violence, and natural disasters. Yet most of us live with all this with some indifference. We read of floods or genocidal events and we say “How sad,” but it doesn’t usually evoke a crisis of faith. What has disturbed Asaph so deeply? Is he far more sensitive to the suffering and oppression of the poor and innocent than most of us? No. In verses 13 and 14 we see that *his* life is not going well *in comparison* to others who are less moral than he is. He says, “Here I am, working to keep my hands and heart pure, and these others do not. Yet every morning I am reminded how much less comfortable and successful I have been.” Verse 14 might mean that he has some particular “plague” — a real disease or some other trouble. But it is just as likely that the disparity between his life and the lives of the immoral *is* the plague and “punishment” (v. 14).

In verse 3, Asaph is even willing to admit that his resentment is due to outright “envy.” It is a credit to his honesty that he has not rationalized his anger with lofty language about the exploitation of the poor. He is willing here to say, “My indignation over the injustice of the elites was really, basically, a form of envy and jealousy. I wasn’t just angry at them — I wanted what they had. If my own life had been going better and I was getting a bigger piece of the pie, I would have been much less bothered by the injustice of the powerful. It is only when my life’s circumstances started going bad that I began to feel the injustice in the world and become angry at God.”

Of all he says about himself, however, the most startling self-revelation may be in verse 13. Twice he says, “In *vain* have I kept my heart pure; in *vain* have I washed my hands in innocence.” The doubling of the phrase shows that this was a heart cry in the midst of his anguish. But this also shows us how his heart has been reasoning. Derek Kidner writes:

To decide that such earnestness has been a waste of time [in vv. 13-14] is pathetically self-centered — what did I get out of it? — but the very formulating of the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind, which he now describes [in vv.15 and following].¹

Asaph baldly admits that his effort to live righteously was a calculated, self-interested one. Something is only in vain if it has failed to realize its main purpose. What, then, is the main purpose (in his mind) of living a pure and holy life? Clearly, the main purpose is a life in which he shares in the comforts and privileges he has envied in verses 4-12. His heart is saying, “What profit are you getting out of all this holiness? Living holy is pretty ‘expensive’ — you have to give up a lot of pleasurable things! You’d better be getting a lot back — like good health, a happy family, emotional well-being, some economic security. But they have not been forthcoming. All this holiness has been *in vain*.”

We should experience a very unpleasant shock of recognition as we read this. When our life circumstances go bad, the spiritual foundations for our behavior are revealed. *Why* do we live a holy and pure life? For God's sake? For the sake of truth and good? Or for our own profit? Asaph's heart cry "in vain" shows why he is in such agony. His *real* hopes and goals have been removed, and he is furious and empty. But, as Kidner pointed out above, it almost seems as if the articulation of this thought has shocked him. (After verse 14 his thinking seems to turn around.) It is "pathetically self-centered" to live your whole life on such a basis. Such a life is just as shallow and self-absorbed as those of the elites he despises! The only difference is that his self-centeredness hides under a veneer of morality and religion.

It is interesting to notice the similarities to the book of Job. This book also spends a great deal of time on the question, "Why does God allow unjust suffering and unjust prosperity?" But the book begins with a debate between God and Satan. When God speaks highly of Job as "my servant" (Job 1:8), Satan retorts, "Does Job fear [serve] God for *nothing*?" Satan asserts that Job only obeys God out of a desire for personal profit. He says to God, "Job does not serve you for *you*, but only for himself. You are just a means to his real end goal — a happy life." The rest of the book of Job shows that this accusation is mainly wrong but partially right.

This, of course, does not mean that the question of unjust suffering and the prosperity of the wicked is not a true and real problem for belief. Nothing we are saying should be thought to deny this. There are such things as legitimate doubt and legitimate righteous indignation. But in this psalm we see that anger toward God over evil and suffering often has an arrogance of its own, hurt pride, and a great deal of self-centeredness. Here Asaph discovers, as Job did, that much of his anger at God over evil is rooted in the selfish way he was using God for his own ends, instead of serving him for who he is in himself.

4. Verses 15-20. What are the next three steps or things that occur that help him to "get his foothold" back?

First (v. 16), we see that **he begins to think of others**. He gets his mind somewhat off himself onto basic duties and responsibilities. "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed your children" (v. 16). It is significant that he looks around and calls his fellow believers "your children." He remembers that we are all adopted by grace into God's family, and therefore he has family responsibilities. He cannot simply spew out his doubts and anger on everyone around him. He does not want to cause any of them to slip. He is saying to himself, "I don't belong to myself. My thinking and speaking will have a great impact on others. So I'd better not act impulsively. I must carefully think all this out, not just lash out. I must not just think of myself, but of others as well."

This is, of course, insufficient for regaining one's spiritual footing. In the long run, you cannot be faithful to God only out of consideration for others. However, in the short run, it can stop the slide for a time. It can slow you down and give you a chance to regain your equilibrium. And it is a good preliminary way to combat the self-pity and self-absorption that have been some of the main factors in your slide.

Second (v. 17a), we see that he **goes into the sanctuary** (v. 17). The word "till" shows that this was the turning point. What does this mean? Kidner says it best: "The light breaks in as he turns to God himself, and to him as an object not of speculation but of worship." ² Asaph began to go to God in worship and prayer. The reality is that you will never get out of downward spirals only by thinking; you need to worship. This is one of the main points of the book of Psalms. For most of us, when we are weighed down with burdens, we virtually stop praying, or else only pray cursory prayers of petition. But when Asaph "entered the sanctuary," he was engaging himself in full temple worship. He was not simply saying, "Please help me"; he was processing his anger and doubts in the full range of prayer. He worshiped, adored, repented, gave thanks, and petitioned God. Asaph did not merely think; he used the means of grace — corporate worship and so on — to subject his thoughts to the presence and reality of God. What does this mean practically? It means we have to "break the ice" with God; to engage in the very difficult discipline of Bible study and prayer even when we don't feel like it.

Third (vv. 17b-20), we see that **he sees the "big picture."** The time for reflection (v. 16) and worship (v. 17a) brings at last a new insight. He sees "their end" (v. 17b), how "you place them on slippery ground" (v. 18), and "you will despise them" (v. 20). Here Asaph stops looking at the parts and stands back to view the whole. There are at least two dimensions to what he sees about God's justice. First, "you place them on slippery ground" means that people who seek after self-aggrandizement, power, wealth, and beauty over commitment and service are living on very unstable turf. Many, many such people *do* fall "suddenly" (v. 19) and they *do* reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7). Second, however, whether or not an unjust person gets his "come-uppance" in this life, all who live for themselves will eventually be "despised" by God as "fantasies" (NIV). "Judgment," notes Kidner, "... is ultimately God's personal rejection, his dismissal of someone as of no further account or interest." ³ C. S. Lewis cautions, "We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside* — repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored." ⁴

An extremely interesting metaphor is used in verse 20. Asaph says that the wicked are "like a dream" which, when we awaken, we "despise." This refers to a common phenomenon. We may be having a very vivid dream, in which something is attacking us, someone has power over us, or perhaps some

terrible monster is about to devour us, and we are in a panic. As long as we are asleep, the attackers and forces in the dream seem very real and we are in anguish. But as soon as we awaken, even though we may be covered in sweat and our pulse racing, we laugh with relief. The monster was only a fantasy, a phantom without reality. This is the vivid image by which Asaph conveys to himself (and us) what earthly power is like if it is not exercised for God. These forces seem real and dangerous, but only temporarily. They cannot hurt you in any ultimate way. This is much like Psalm 49:16, 20: "Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases, for he will take nothing with him when he dies. ...A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish."

However, a closer look at verse 20 (in Psalm 73) shows an additional assertion. Asaph does not say, "As a dream vanishes upon awakening, so when I awake, I will despise them." Rather, he says, "So when *you* arise, O Lord, *you* will despise them as fantasies." This is a remarkable, even daring insight. Sometimes believers have looked at the prospering of the wicked and the injustice in the world and have said God seemed to be "asleep." Thus in Psalm 44:22-24: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! ...Why do you ...forget our misery and oppression?" This is a bold but honest question in bold language. But here in Psalm 73, Asaph picks up the picture of God sleeping through the world's injustice and uses it in a positive way. He is saying, "God appears to be sleeping, but it is not because of impotence or insensitivity. It is simply his refusal to be hurried. One day he most certainly *will* 'arise' and when he does, the world's power will be seen to be utterly ephemeral."

Asaph has realized that, ultimately, God defines reality. Only what God honors will last; everything else is smoke and mirrors. What the world honors and respects passes away suddenly even in this life. Fame and influence are extremely fleeting. But in the final state, only those things done for God will last. In C. S. Lewis's parable, *The Great Divorce*, the people of hell are insubstantial, like ghosts. Even the grass on the outskirts of heaven hurts their feet and cuts them like knives. If there is a God, this will *have* to be what happens. The real difficulty for Asaph and the rest of us is God's apparent slowness. If we are too present-minded, we will feel God is unjust. But if we think about "their final destiny," things will come into focus.

- 5. Get more specific ideas about what Asaph did "in the sanctuary" (v. 17a). (a) Read verses 21-24. How did worship give him a new perspective on himself? (b) Read verses 25-26. How did worship give him a new perspective on God? How is this the real antidote for his problem?**

(a) Verses 21-24. A new perspective on ourselves.

Apparently, one of the first things that happened "in the sanctuary" was that

Asaph got a new, humbling sense of God's grace. In some ways Asaph had already come to realize that he was full of envy (v. 3), self-pity, and selfishness (vv. 13-14). In verse 15 he realized that his rash and angry spirit was a danger to others. Now he realizes that he has been acting "like a beast" (v. 22), just acting out his instincts without reflecting on the big picture. Then Asaph says, "Yet". This "yet" is a realization of grace. He realizes that God has stayed by him, and that "you hold me by my right hand." He begins to rejoice and be amazed at God's "In Spite Of" love. He realizes that God has been protecting him and holding him up all along. He has never let him go. This amazement at God's grace is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it humbles us and begins to drain us of the pride and self-centeredness at the root of our problem. But, on the other hand, it does not let our ego go into collapse. Our hearts, which are deeply invested in works-righteousness and earning our own salvation, will want to say, "Well, since you are a beast, since you haven't lived up to the standard, just leave! God won't accept you now! Hate yourself!" But the very thing — his unmerited grace — that has convicted us of sin is also powerfully affirming of us. We are humbled by the fact that *he won't let us go*. So when we grasp the grace of God, it keeps us from the *reverse* pride of self-hatred and inferiority. It is just as self-centered to hate yourself. That takes just as much of a commitment to self-salvation as the superiority and self-centeredness that led to the problem of anger and doubt in the first place.

Alec Motyer, an Old Testament commentator, says that a key to the psalmist's recovery is that, in the sanctuary, through a re-orientation to God's unmerited grace, Asaph has received a strong hope in the face of death.

As to his present, he is in the Lord's company (v. 23a), gripped by the Lord (v. 23b); [but] as to his future, he is safe within the Lord's over-arching purpose (v. 24a) and 'afterwards' he will be 'taken' to 'glory.' God is the great bracket of reality round both heaven and earth (v. 25) and in God he has an *eternal* 'portion.' The absurdity of the contention that the Old Testament knew nothing of hope after death is just this: the heart of the Old Testament religion is fellowship union with the living God..."⁵

(b) Verses 25-26. A new perspective on God.

This is the antidote to the essential problem. Whatever we worship, we adore for itself, as an end in itself, as satisfying and delightful in itself. In verses 25-26, Asaph asks the unanswerable question. Paraphrased, it is "What could I or should I want more than you? What could save me, ennoble me, satisfy me, ravish me, uphold me, beautify me, and support me more than you?"

The famous phrase, "Whom have I in heaven but you?" is a negative. It is looking at the things he sought after and realizing, "I don't really have anything! These things can't last. They aren't truly mine. They will fade away. Ultimately, I have nothing if I don't have God." The second phrase is, "and earth has nothing I desire beside you. ...God is... my portion forever." Your "portion" was your inheritance, your wealth. Asaph realized he was using God, not treasuring God as his real wealth. As he cried out the rhetorical question of verse 25 in worship, his heart came to sense these sentiments as realities. That is what prayer "in the sanctuary," in the presence of God, accomplishes.

We begin to sense God's value, see his beauty, and feel satisfied with him.

6. Derek Kidner says "Verse 1 is the key to the whole psalm." How might that be true, in light of all you've seen?

Kidner says:

Verse 1 stands somewhat by itself, and is the key to the whole psalm, telling not merely what God can do for a man, but of what he can be to him. The phrase, "pure in heart," is more significant than it may seem, for the psalm will show the relative unimportance of circumstances in comparison with attitudes, which may be either soured by self-interest (3, 13) or set free by love (25). "Pure" means more than clean-minded... basically it is being totally committed to God." ⁶

Kidner is saying that our commitment to God as God is the key determinant of whether we experience God as good ("of what he can *be* to him") in the midst of the difficulties and injustices of life. If, without the gospel, we are earning our salvation and blessings from God through "washing our hands" in purity, we will become embittered by difficulties in life. With the gospel, however, we can be humbled and affirmed in the sanctuary, which gives us the big picture and enables us to experience God as good in all circumstances.

7. How does knowing about the work of Jesus Christ make it even easier for us (a) to understand the idea of a God who seems to sleep through the world's storm of injustice (v. 20), and (b) to know that God will never let us go or forsake us (vv. 23-24)?

(a) The "sleeping" Lord.

The New Testament picks up the idea of God sleeping through a storm and answers it in the person of Jesus Christ. In Mark 4:35-41, we read of Jesus and his disciples in a boat when a life-threatening storm arose. But "Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion," apparently impotent and/or indifferent to their peril. The disciples broach this very issue when they wake him: "Teacher, don't you *care* if we drown?" (v. 38). This is the question of the psalmists, Job, Jeremiah, and many others. But Jesus immediately calms the storm, showing no lack of power, and he rebukes them for questioning his love. This confirms what Asaph intuits. The Lord is neither out of control nor uncaring. He *will* arise.

Jesus *will* calm the threatening storm of evil and injustice, but only the way Jonah did! The New Testament tells us that Jesus came to earth the first time not to *bring* judgment, but to *bear* it. Had he come to put down all evil and sin, there would have been no hope for anyone. Therefore, he calms the storm the way Jonah did: by being cast into the sea of sin in order to save others from the storm of judgment (Jonah 1:4-17). That way God can be both "just and justifier" (Rom. 3:26); that is, he honors the Law and its demands for justice,

yet still accepts us. This gives us a hint of why there has been a delay, why God has not “arisen” and simply destroyed all evil. He could not destroy evil without destroying us, unless Jesus had come.

(b) The never-forsaking God.

As Alec Motyer says, the heart of Old Testament religion was a fellowship-union with the living God. The Old Testament writers rightly sense that this union could not possibly be broken, even by death. Jesus argues that God cannot be the God of the dead, but of the living (Matt. 22:31-32; Mark 12:26-27; Luke 20:37-38). The metaphors of being “[held] by my right hand” (v. 23) and being “guid[ed] with your counsel” (v. 24) are images of close, intimate friendship. God holds my hand and speaks heart to heart with me. How can this be broken by death? This is the intuition of Asaph, David (as in Psalm 23, where he “will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”), and other Old Testament saints.

But, as we have seen before, the ultimate assurance that God will not forsake us is that he forsook Jesus. When Jesus cried on the cross that he was “forsaken,” he meant that God’s face had turned away from him, and God had let go of his hand. Why? To pay the penalty of our sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Since God cannot justly receive two payments for the same sin, it would now be unjust and unfaithful of God to forsake us because of our sins (see 1 John 1:9, “faithful and just to forgive us our sins”).

8. Think back over the psalm. What have you learned that can help you “pray through your doubts and difficulties” better?

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 261.

² Derek Kidner, pp. 261-262.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 262.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, cited in Kidner, p. 262.

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 153.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 259.

Psalms

Petitioning I

Study 15 | Psalm 28

Introduction

We have been learning about different types of prayer as we have considered various categories of psalms. We've examined psalms of meditation (praying our hearts *into* the truth), psalms of confession (praying our hearts *out* of sin and guilt), and psalms of lamentation (praying our hearts *through* trouble and suffering). Now we come to psalms of petition and refuge. These psalms look *ahead*, into the future. They go to God and ask him to work out his justice and love in history. They ask for "thy kingdom come" and for "our daily bread."

PSALM 28

- 1. This psalm is a prayer of petition. (a) What two things is David asking for with regard to the wicked (v. 3 and v. 4)? (b) Why do we have more assurance than David did that the petition of verse 3 will be answered?**

(a) What two things is David asking for?

Read closely or you will miss the fact that there are two petitions here. One is more obvious than the other.

The more obvious petition is in verse 4: "Repay them for their deeds... bring back upon them what they deserve." The selfishness and malice of the wicked cause enormous heartache and devastation in the world. Many people who trample on others never seem to be brought down themselves. They live on the fruit of their ruthless business practices, and the like. Notice that the psalmist is not seeking vengeance himself; he asks God to do it. And notice that this is not a personal vendetta against certain individuals. David is speaking more broadly about the need for justice. Derek Kidner observes:

Nothing stings so sharply as injustice, and nothing should; so these verses are not simply vindictive, but put into words the protest of any healthy conscience at the wrongs of the present order, and the conviction that a day of judgment is a moral necessity. It is in this sense that God's elect "cry to him day and night."¹

But there is another petition in verse 3. David says, "Do not drag me away *with* the wicked." Why would he be afraid of this? Derek Kidner surmises that David is only afraid of injustice. David sees that the wicked are going to receive consequences for their behavior and he is saying, "Please be sure to be fair and don't let me go down with them!" But if David were absolutely sure of his innocence, why would he speak to God about this at all? And why would he consider his request a request for "mercy" (vv. 2, 6)? Why does he seem to be very unsure (in vv. 1-5) that God is going to answer him? He does not say, "You owe this to me!"

I think, rather, that David's definition of wickedness is searching enough to show him the wickedness in himself. (See the next question.) He realizes that God just might send him away with the evildoers. This foreshadows Paul's classic statement in Romans 3:22: "There is *no* difference" [between moral/religious people and immoral/irreligious people].

(b) Why do we have more assurance than David did?

It is clear that David is not sure God will hear him. Verses 1-2 show that. Why do we have much greater assurance that we will not be "dragged away with the wicked"? The answer (as always) is to think of Christ. David's greater Son was one person who was so perfect, there was no possibility of his deserving punishment. Yet look! In Isaiah 53:9 we see that "he was assigned a grave *with the wicked*." David was not dragged away with the wicked, but Jesus was. And we will not be dragged away with the wicked *because* Jesus was. Why?

When Paul says repeatedly that "we died with him," he is not speaking metaphorically. When we believe in Christ, we are united with Christ. God treats us as if we had already been executed, as if we had already paid our debt, because we died with Christ! God was paid absolutely "every penny" we owed for our wickedness. That is why now "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Because Christ was "dragged away" for us, he paid our debt. God will not punish us further. If he did, he would unjustly receive two payments for the same sins.

2. Now look at David's definition of "wickedness" in verses 3-5. (a) Define and describe the "wickedness" that so concerns David (v. 3 and v. 5). (b) How is verse 3b a complete reverse of what our relationships should be with others? (c) How do you measure up to this definition of wickedness?

(a) Define and describe the wickedness that concerns David.

There are two characteristics of "wickedness" that David mentions here.

The first has to do with relationships with other people. The wicked "speak cordially" with people while harboring "malice in their hearts" (v. 3). On the surface, they feign love, acceptance, and good will, while underneath they are hostile, seeking only their own interests and advantage in all relationships.

The second characteristic has to do with their relationship to God. The wicked "show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done" (v. 5). This is a sweeping and profound critique. The wicked do not disbelieve in God so much as they disregard him. They are practical atheists, even if they subscribe to a belief in God, and even if they are moral and upright. Their

thinking is not God-centered. They simply leave him out of their thoughts. Even their morality is not intended to further God's work in the world; it simply is practical for them or it makes them feel upright and superior. They do not make major decisions (marriage, career, purchases) by thinking, "What does God want? Which option before me would best enhance his revealed will for my life — the things the Bible says he wants to do in my life?" It is also possible that David is thinking of the way the wicked trample on people to get their way. Every person is in the image of God, an infinitely precious "work of God's hands."

These two characteristics of wickedness are, of course, interrelated. When Jesus summed up the requirements of the Law, he told us to "love God" with all our heart and soul, and "love our neighbor" as we would want to be loved ourselves. These two principles rise and fall together. Without deep love for and from God in our lives, we will never be able to love others with abandon. On the other hand, bitterness and selfishness in our relationships with others make it impossible for us to receive and give love to God.

(b) How is verse 3b a reversal of right relationships?

Notice that this hypocrisy is the polar opposite of the relational integrity believers should demonstrate. We should be willing to speak the truth — criticize and even challenge or oppose others — yet always with their best interests at heart. We should never oppose or criticize just to "win" or to pay back. In other words, we often must speak "uncordially," but always out of loving concern. The wicked never rock the boat but are filled with inner hate. The godly often rock the boat, but always out of love and humility.

Romans 12:9-21 puts this beautifully. It says first that "love must be sincere [transparent]. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (v. 9). This tells us that we are not only to be honest about what is in our hearts, we are to speak against sin and evil. At the same time, we are told, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. ...Bless those who persecute you. ...Do not repay anyone evil for evil" (vv. 10-17). This tells us that we are to have no ill will toward anyone. We are to forgive, to "bless" them — which means to genuinely wish for and pray for someone to flourish.

This is exactly the opposite of the relationships of the wicked in Psalm 28:3b. Outwardly, they do not confront or challenge, yet inwardly they are filled with disdain and ill will. Outwardly, a Christian is called to speak up and confront sin and evil, yet inwardly he is to do so only with humble hope and a desire for the other's benefit. Galatians 6:1 puts it together: "If someone is caught in a sin... restore him gently."

(c) How do you measure up to this standard for wickedness?

We use the word “wicked” today only for serial killers or murderous dictators. But by biblical standards, most of the nice people around us are living in wickedness. Most people simply disregard God’s work as they live their lives. God is only someone or something we bring into focus when we are having trouble meeting our goals. We do not live God-centered lives in all our thoughts and decisions. Along with this, most people are very self-interested in relationships. They are quite cordial to you, but only as long as your relationship is of use to them. People do not routinely speak the truth out of love. They are not sacrificially committed to the growth and joy of others.

Obviously, this means that all of us have hearts that are filled with real “evil” and “wickedness” (Jer. 17:9). Thus Jesus was able to casually tell his disciples during a parable that they were all “evil” (Luke 11:13)! Now we know why Paul can say that there is “no one righteous” (Rom. 3:23) and why John can say, “The whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 John 5:19, KJV).

3. We have seen what David was petitioning for. What do we learn in the psalm about how we should petition God? (a) What attitudes or beliefs underlie his requests? (Think especially of what “uplifted hands” (v. 2) symbolize. Why is each attitude/belief important for petitioning? (b) The word for “anointed one” in Hebrew is “Messiah” and in Greek is “Christos.” How does David unwittingly point us to Christ here?

(a) What attitudes or beliefs underlie his request?

Kidner says that the “lifted hands” have traditionally been emblematic of petitioning prayer because of what they represent. Prayer is coming “empty handed.”²

First, we come admitting we are empty of *power*. Empty hands are symbolic of vulnerability — they contain no weapons. That is the point of verses 1-2. God is called “my Rock,” a symbol of strength, and David then immediately confesses his weakness and impotence. “If you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.”

Second, we come admitting that we are empty of *merit*. Empty hands symbolize a lack of worthiness. They contain no offerings or money; there is nothing we can do to deserve a positive answer to this request. That is the point of verse 3: “Do not drag me away with the wicked.” The cry for “mercy” implies this strongly. Why would the request for deliverance be called mercy if it was something he deserved? Then it would be a straight plea for justice. But David admits his unworthiness. This is close to the line from the hymn, “Rock of Ages”: “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.”³

Third, however, David shows us that we must come in *confidence*. The empty hands symbolize an expectancy to receive. This is implied in the persistence and directness of the petitions (“To you I call... Do not turn a deaf ear... Hear my cry...”). But it comes out clearly at the end, when David calls his people “your inheritance” (v. 9). This is a remarkable claim. Your inheritance is your wealth, the bulk of your worth. To call his people (and thus, himself) God’s “inheritance” is to assume and claim that God treasures his people and treats them as his precious jewels.

These three premises — that we are weak, undeserving, and treasured — are necessary for ardent, relentless, petitioning prayer. If we are only confident in ourselves, we will not pray, because we will not feel helpless. If, however, we are only filled with self-loathing and no confidence at all, we will not pray fervently. We need a balance of humility (in ourselves) and confidence (in God’s covenant faithfulness) to pray with ardor and order.

(b) How does David unwittingly point us to Christ?

In prayer, the psalmist constantly remembers the great “covenants” that God continually makes with his people. A covenant is both a personal and legal relationship. It is intimate but based on solemn, public, binding oaths. In these covenants, God swears to be faithful to his people. Usually these covenants are made through a covenant representative — an anointed prophet or king (such as Moses or David). The “anointed one” represents the people before God.

Often, as here, David shows a lack of confidence in himself (vv. 1-3) but remembers that God is a covenantal God who makes oaths and stays faithful. Thus, when he turns from himself as an individual human being to his standing in the covenant as the “anointed one,” the King of Israel, he grows in confidence. He says in verse 8, “You may not owe me, a sinner, salvation, but you will not abandon your covenant. You will always save your anointed.”

The word for “anointed” in Hebrew is “Messiah,” and in Greek is “Christos.” As Christians, we can better understand why God will always save his anointed and answer our prayers through him. David was only a “type,” a forerunner, of the only *real* covenant representative. Jesus came to earth and totally fulfilled the covenant. He lived a perfect life, yet took the covenant curse for us (death — the penalty for covenant breaking). Therefore, when we believe in him, God sees us as perfectly fulfilling the covenant — perfectly obedient. Thus we can *truly* pray Psalm 28: “Father, I deserve to be dragged off with the wicked (v. 3) but I also know that you will uphold your anointed one. I am his! Answer my prayer for the sake of the anointed one. In him I am treasured by you. I know that because you gave him up for me. So I make my petition in confidence.”

4. What seems to happen in verse 6? Has this ever happened to you? Should we expect this every time? Why or why not?

Kidner notes that many petitioning psalms seem to have a turning point that he calls “an answering touch.”⁴ The first part of the prayer is often anxious and even pessimistic. Then, suddenly, the prayer becomes not only hopeful and confident, but the psalmist actually begins to talk in the past tense about the prayer having been answered. How can this be? Did deliverance literally become visible in the middle of the prayer, or did he have a vision? There is no indication of this. Rather, it seems that the pray-er experiences within his soul a sense of God’s presence. He senses that God cares and is going to act for him.

This is a simple fact of Christian experience. Sometimes we petition God for matters that weigh us down and, when the prayer is over, we feel the burden lifted right on the spot. It may not be an overwhelming experience at all. We just may find that our anxiety and worry evaporate as we pray. God becomes more real, and/or we find things coming into perspective. This would be the “answering touch.”

However this does not always happen, nor is there any promise that it always should. The next psalm we will study, Psalm 25, shows that we are not to expect this all the time. One reason for this is that the purpose of petitioning prayer is two-fold. Not only is it designed to change our circumstances, it is also designed to change *us* so we can handle our circumstances (or even make altered circumstances unnecessary).

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 123.

² Derek Kidner, p. 123.

³ Augustus M. Toplady, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,” 1776.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 63, cited in this series in “Repentance I: Psalms 6 and 32.”

Psalm

Petitioning II

Study 16 | Psalm 25

PSALM 25

1. What basic petitions does David make? Under what broad categories do his various requests fall?

The first category of petitions concern David's *enemies*. They are mentioned in verses 2-3 and again in verses 19-21.

The second category of petitions relate to *guidance*. This is probably the major thrust of the psalm. The first request is in verses 4-5, but then verses 8-10 and 12-15 are almost completely concerned with David's need for God's leading.

The third category of requests pops up briefly but persistently throughout the psalm. These requests seek *forgiveness* and the removal of guilt over past sins. These cries occur in verses 7, 11, and 18.

The fourth category of requests is the most subtle and easily missed, for they are indirect. David is asking God for general *protection* and refuge. At the beginning and the end of his prayer, David is asking God himself to be his "trust" (v. 1), "refuge" (v. 20), and "hope" (v. 21). Kidner says that to "hope" in God is the same as to "wait" for God.¹ To "wait" is to obey despite the lack of any apparent action on God's part, and thus it is to accept not simply God's word but also his timing. David cries "turn to me" (v. 16) but by the end of the psalm, there has not been any answer. David is (indirectly) seeking patience and submission to God's will as he prays.

2. (a) What does David ask with regard to his enemies? (b) What do we learn about how to deal with enemies from David's prayer?

The first category of petition has to do with David's enemies. We can break this general category down into two basic requests.

David's first request concerning his enemies is that he not be "put to shame" (vv. 2, 20) before them and that he be protected from them (v. 20). In other words, he wants victory over them. We do not know the nature of this struggle with his enemies, though it was probably (at least) a political struggle within David's government or (at most) a military struggle with those who wished to overthrow and kill him. But Kidner says that David's motive for this first request goes beyond the personal. "Enemies... are implied to be ideologically as well as personally opposed to David. Their victory would discredit not only him but what he stood for: that is, the conviction that a man must live by the help of God, not by his wits (3)." ² David is therefore not simply asking for personal success in this struggle. His concerns are broader and his motivation is less

self-interested. He wants onlookers to see that it is right to “hope” in God rather than in human sophistication and machinations (“treachery,” v. 3). He wants people to see the basic principle that if God is your hope, you will never have to experience shame.

His second petition concerning his enemies is that “integrity and faithfulness” would protect him (v. 21). This goes beyond a simple request for victory. David is asking that God would help him fight treachery with integrity. He is saying, “Don’t let me be tempted to ‘fight fire with fire.’ When they treat me with dishonesty and subterfuge, let me respond with integrity, honesty, and fairness.” (This tells me that the enemies here are probably not military ones, but political ones.) David is not just asking God’s help for the result of the struggle, but for his own self-control and heart attitudes within the struggle.

Most of us have enemies, even if they are less dangerous to life and limb than David’s. You may have people at work who simply are trying to keep you from getting too much success and influence. You may have people who oppose your policies on the board of your church or in your denomination. You may have neighbors who want to push you out of the neighborhood or apartment building. You may have family members or former friends who won’t forgive you for some words or action and now do what they can to slander your reputation.

David’s concerns with his enemies are helpful for us, and they reflect the same concerns as the New Testament (even if, in light of the cross, New Testament authors go beyond David in hope for the enemies themselves, as in Romans 12:14-21). First, David is primarily concerned with God’s reputation and honor. He is more concerned that people will turn to human scheming than to God. This is a hard distinction to make, but it is critical. If we oppose our enemies, is it to guard our own dignity and save our own “face,” or is it to uphold truth and God’s honor and cause?

Second, David realizes that the evil has won if it can get him to overcome his enemies with the same hatred (v. 19) and treachery (v. 3) that they employ. We can never “repay evil with evil” (Rom. 12:17). This does not mean that we cannot protest injustice, or that we should not oppose evil practices zealously. (See Romans 12:9, 11: “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good... Never be lacking in zeal.”) But it does mean that in our conflict, we must treat the enemy with fairness, honesty, and even good will. David’s contrast of the “hate” of the enemy (v. 19) with “uprightness” (v. 21) strongly suggests that he does not want any ill will or hostility in his own heart toward them, even if they have it for him. Here we have a foreshadowing of the New Testament’s teaching on handling enemies in light of the cross. We are to forgive our enemies, never taking vengeance on them, but seeking their good even as we oppose their wrong practices (see Romans 12:19-20: “Do not take revenge... If your enemy is hungry, feed him. ...In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head.”)

It is never loving to allow someone to sin against you or against others, so we must “overcome evil” (Rom. 12:21). But we do so not out of a desire to pay back, humiliate, or bring down. We do not oppose as a way to punish, but as a way to redeem.

In summary, we have not stopped the spread of evil if we use it against our opponents. If we “beat” our enemies out of a love for our own honor, or through hatred and backstabbing, then evil has taken *us* over. To paraphrase J. R. R. Tolkien, “We have cast down one Dark Lord, only to put another in his place.”

3. What do we learn about guidance from David’s prayer? What do we learn from verses 4-5, verses 8-9, verses 10 and 12, and verses 14-15?

This is the main burden of the psalm, and we learn a great deal about the Bible’s understanding of divine guidance. Though there are many ways to divide up David’s prayer for guidance, we will divide them into four basic parts: verses 4-5, 8-9, 10 and 12, and 14-15. These are not all petitions that directly address God *per se*. But they are all statements of praise and declarations about God’s leading in the Lord’s presence. They are David’s way of reminding his own soul of how God guides. Therefore, they are all ways David seeks guidance in prayer.

David’s first petition for guidance is in verses 4-5, where he asks for guidance “in your truth.” This is not simply a request to be led into sound doctrine or belief, since the petition is to find God’s “ways” and “paths,” which ordinarily indicate practical living. Therefore, in this first petition he is asking God to instruct him generally in his will for human beings. This is not a request for specific help with a specific decision. It is rather an expressed desire for a mind and heart matured and seasoned by God’s truth so they can habitually distinguish the good and wise from the evil or foolish. This is the first “building block” in a life that is regularly led and guided by God. It is a deep and pervasive *knowledge of God’s truth*.

David’s second statement regarding guidance is in verses 8-9, where he says “he instructs sinners in his ways” (v. 8). This is more than a simple truism that “everyone is a sinner, and so everyone God guides is a sinner.” Rather, it is David’s way to say that God guides only those who *know* they are sinners. The proof of this interpretation is the parallel phrase in verse 9: “he guides the humble in what is right.” This means, at least, that we will never know God’s guidance if we are proud. A dependent spirit and a mistrust of one’s own wisdom are necessary. How does this work itself out practically? Overconfident persons assume they know what to do and therefore take no time to reflect. Without time to reflect and a willingness to consider alternative courses of action, God is not given room to guide our thoughts and hearts.

However, David may not simply be saying that we are guided if we know we are sinners in general. His point may be that we are guided if we know the particular sins that tend to characterize our hearts. Blindness to our biases and our tendency to deny particular truths are all major obstacles to wise living. For example, an inordinate need for people's approval continually leads to over-commitments and over-estimations of what we can accomplish in a given amount of time. So does a love of power or wealth. So here we see the second building block in the life that is regularly guided by God. It is an intimate *knowledge of one's own heart*.

David's third principle regarding guidance can be seen in verses 10 and 12. (These two verses on guidance are interrupted by one of David's cries for forgiveness. Though we should look at these cries by themselves, we now realize why these are not truly "changing the subject" from guidance. It is only the humble and penitent person who is led of God.) In verse 10 David says, "All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant." The "ways of the LORD" are either the circumstances of life to which God takes you, or the deeds he calls you to do. Either way, this is a remarkable promise. It is an Old Testament version of Romans 8:28: "All things work together for good to those who love God..." It is saying that if you are in an obedient, personal relationship (i.e., "covenant") with God, then whatever happens to you is part of God's loving and faithful purposes.

What relevance does this have for the person seeking God's guidance in her or his life? First, it tells us to relax! This is very important to people seeking God's guidance in a time of decision making. Ironically, we often make poor decisions *because* we are so afraid of making a poor decision. An inordinate fear of failure or a strong feeling that "it is all up to me" can lead us to rash action. David is almost saying, "Guided is the one who knows he is going to be guided, ultimately, despite himself." The parallel verse — verse 12 — confirms this. God "chooses" the way for us and then shows it to us. Even if we don't see it, it is still chosen for us. Second, it tells us that the most important prerequisites for guidance are a clear conscience and an obedient life ("keep the demands of the covenant"). If we have these, we are much less likely to make poor decisions. So, the third building block in the God-led life is a confidence in and *knowledge of his sovereignty*.

The fourth principle for guidance is laid down in verses 14-15. It may not immediately leap out at the English reader, though the NIV gives strong hints. In verse 14, David says that the Lord "confides" in "those who fear him." "Confides" is a remarkable word. It conveys the sense of intimacy and, of course, confidence. If we "confide" something, it is usually rather secret, and we do so only to trustworthy friends. On the other hand, as we have seen previously in these Psalm Studies, the "fear of the Lord" is not to be scared of God. To "fear" God is to move beyond head knowledge to awe and delight

before God (see Psalm 130:3-4). Verse 15 says that David's "eyes are ever on the Lord." This cannot be a statement that David believes in God or believes God exists. To "look for" God is to seek his presence. It is to seek an experience of his glory, presence, and grace. So David is talking of *fellowship* with God, the difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God.

The NIV translates as "confide" the Hebrew word *sodh*, a word that can mean both "counsel" and "council." Derek Kidner tells us that the word can be translated "secret" or (maybe best of all) "friendship," because it refers to "both the circle of one's close associates and the matters that are discussed with them." ³

What then is David saying? He is saying that we learn wisdom and insight in the intimacy of prayer and fellowship with God. This is the closest he gets to saying that God may, in prayer, give us fairly specific guidance about particular questions and decisions. But it is more likely that David is telling us that prayer and communion with God gives us God's "whole counsel" — an illuminated mind that knows God's heart, the human heart, and the times and seasons well enough to make informed decisions. So this is the fourth building block of a guided life: *the knowledge of the Lord*.

Summary: The overall thrust of this psalm is striking. Essentially, David never tells us how to get guided, but what kind of person gets guided. He says if we (1) have a mind filled with God's Word, (2) a heart that knows its own flaws well, (3) a life that is generally obedient without major areas of non-compliance to God's will, (4) a soul that is basically at peace, knowing that God in his grace will work his will out for us, even through our failures, and (5) a life of prayer in which God regularly provides illuminating insights — then we will generally make wise decisions. We will not be foolish and rash.

We need to admit that this is not the way most modern people seek guidance from God. We usually are extremely functional: we want to know the specific way to read God's mind about a specific issue. But Psalm 25 tells us that guidance does not happen like that. God does not want us to read his mind. God wants to *give* us his mind — to put his wisdom, truth, peace, and self-perspective in us so that we become wise, guided persons. Kidner adds, "This whole approach to divine guidance is personal and mature, unlike the basically pagan search for irrational pointers and omens (cf. Is. 47:13)." ⁴

4. This psalm of petition does not end with an “answering touch” as in Psalm 28:6-9.⁵ (See also Psalms 6:8 and 20:6). How can he nonetheless live in confidence that he will never be put to shame (v. 3)?

David makes a rather remarkable categorical claim: “No one whose hope is in you shall ever be put to shame.” Does he mean that every believer will automatically receive his or her desired answer in prayer — that no believer will ever suffer humiliation, failure, defeat, or major loss? I don’t think he could be saying that. He is too wise for that.

What David is saying may be more like what he says in Psalm 24:4 and elsewhere, when he tells us not to “lift up your soul to an idol.” He may be saying that when we “put hope” in anything but God, “shame” (the black despair of bitter disappointment) is the inevitable result. In other words, if in prayer we are able not simply to make our petitions, but to shift our priorities, we can be sure that in the ultimate sense we will not be put to shame. If, for example, we are asking God to save our reputation from slander, we must also be sure that our prayers wean our hearts off our love of reputation. We should remember the One who “made himself of no reputation” for us. We must remember that it is the “praise of God” that is the only honor we really need (see John 12:42-43). If we do that, we are shifting the focus of our hope even as we make our petition. Thus, we come out ready to avoid the deep shame that only comes from false, inordinate hopes. We are fortified, regardless of God’s answer.

By way of illustration, let’s say you are in a boat on a river. A huge rock looms up out of the water, ready to crush your boat. How will you pray? You can pray, “Lord, remove the rock!” You can pray, “Lord, raise the level of the water over the rock!” Or you can pray, “Do either one — it’s alright with me!” The first prayer is like a petition for a change of circumstances; the second is like a petition to change the heart, enabling it to handle the circumstances with poise and peace. Every petitioning prayer should contain *both* “Thy will be done” and “Give us this day our daily bread.”

In summary, one way that prayer makes us confident is when we get a sense that he will answer. The other way is when we re-orient the priorities in our hearts.

5. What did you learn in this psalm that you most need to apply to yourself?

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 117.

² Derek Kidner, pp. 115-116.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 116.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 116.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 63, cited in “Repentance I: Psalms 6 and 32” in this series.

Psalms

Petitioning III

Study 17 | Psalms 4 & 5

Introduction

We look again at psalms of petition, in which we place our needs and requests before God. Petition is the most well known of all the forms of prayer, but that does not mean we do it well! Here are two prayers that come back to back in the Psalter. The first is an evening prayer, in which David is trying to put his heart at rest regarding his concerns before he puts his body down to rest in a night's sleep. The second is a morning prayer.

Psalm 4: EVENING PRAYER

Psalm 4, an evening prayer, and Psalm 5, a morning prayer, are strategically placed by our prayer masters early in [the Psalter] to establish these fundamental rhythms in our lives and get us praying in the cadence of God's word... [which is] now integrated into the rhythm of going to sleep and waking up. ...We never arrive at a condition where we are beyond sleep, self-sufficient in twenty-four hour control. Daily we... [submit] ourselves to that which is deeper than consciousness in order to grow and be healed... [Now, in prayer we sink] into the quiet rhythms of God's creating and covenanting words. ...Evening prayer is a deliberate act of spirit that cultivates willingly what our bodies force on us finally. ¹

1. Compare and contrast the beginning of the prayer (v. 1) with the end (v. 8). What does that tell us about the purpose of this evening prayer?

The beginning of the prayer is "loud," but the ending is "soft." The opening statement — "Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God" — is almost demanding, and its conclusion — "Give me relief from my distress" — reveals the inner anxiety and restlessness of the supplicant. If we look ahead briefly to verse 2, we see more of the same. The first two verses exhibit an agitated, distracted, anxious heart.

The ending of the prayer is remarkably different. In verse 6b, David turns away from talking to himself back toward addressing God. In verse 8 he achieves the goal of an evening prayer. "I will lie down and sleep *in peace*." It is not a statement of triumph to say, "I will lie down and sleep." That is not something we can avoid! Sleep will finally overtake us; we can't help it. But the purpose of evening prayer is seen in the phrase "in peace." As Peterson says (in the above quote), evening prayer aims to give the soul the same "peace" and restoration that the body will get in a night's sleep. Of course, doctors will tell us that the soul and the body always rest better if they do it together! A troubled soul will lead to fitful sleep, and the body won't fully get what it needs.

Regular evening prayer is important, therefore, for both our physical and spiritual health. It is not primarily a prayer of praise or of repentance (though true petition can never be separated from them). It is primarily a prayer of petition. The needs and concerns that burden us are prayed into the hands of God so that our soul is not weighed down as it goes into the night's sleep.

So there are two purposes for petitioning prayer. One is *external*. Through our petitions, God effects the circumstances of history (James 5:16b-18). He will work justice in the world through our prayers (Luke 18:7-8). He says there are many things he will not give or enact until we ask (James 4:2b). When we do ask, he will give us above and beyond what we have asked for (Eph. 3:30). He will begrudge us no good thing we ask for (James 1:6). The second purpose of petitioning prayer is *internal*. Through our petitions, we receive peace and rest. Just as physical sleep involves giving up control and becoming vulnerable, so petition is a giving up of control — a resting and trusting in God to care for our needs.

But how does David get from the distress and clamor verse 1 to the peace of verse 8?

2. In order to lay his burdens on God, David does not simply read God a list. He begins to wrestle and argue. What is actually going on in verses 2-7? Who is he talking to?

Derek Kidner is probably right when he sees these three verse couplets as referring to three groups of people surrounding David. He is “speaking” to each group in verse 2 through verse 7 and correcting them for their errors. (In verse 2 he describes a state of mind and in verse 3 gives an answer. He follows suit in the next two couplets, answering a mindset (v. 4: “anger... on your beds”; v. 6: “Who can show us any good?”) with some kind of critique or response (vv. 4-5: “Search your hearts... trust in the LORD”; vv. 6-7: “the light of your face... greater joy”) The first group is idolatrous, the second group is angry, and the third group is self-pitying.

However, we cannot believe that he is literally sitting in a room, speaking to actual individuals. This is a form of “self-communing” or meditation. He is working on his own heart as he answers these imaginary groups of people. Therefore, as he gives these critiques and counsels, he is giving himself critique and counsel, working truth into his heart. That explains why, when he is done with “counseling,” his own heart has changed from the clamor of verse 1 to the quiet of verse 8. In short, David is preaching to himself, which enables him to unburden himself and put his needs in God’s hands.

3. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 2-3, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 2 David addresses what Kidner calls “the fickle” ²: “How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?” This is a *divided* heart. The first reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns may be that we have made some things into “false gods.” For example, we may be far too worried and despondent about criticism or rejection because we have made our reputation into an idol. Or we may be unduly crushed by financial setbacks partly because our status (the ability to live in a posh neighborhood) is so crucial to our self-image.

Note: Ironically, if you petition God over an issue without confronting the underlying idolatry, your petitioning will only make you feel worse, not better. You may find that the more you think about the issue in prayer, the more despondent you get!

In verse 3 David responds with two statements that counter idolatry: (a) “the LORD has set apart the godly for *himself*” and (b) “the LORD will hear when I call to him.” The first means, “God’s choice of a man [is] not... for office or honor but for fellowship (‘for himself’), [which] is the ultimate answer to the most wounding of aspersions and discouragements.” ³ The second means that it is the Lord alone who can give you any hope or security. It is not your financial status, reputation, or anything else. What David is doing is *putting his needs in perspective*. It is absolutely critical to do this, before we even ask God about them. David is saying, “Remember, heart, if I have the fellowship and love of God, and if I am protected by the wise power of God, I have everything I really need. The things that are in jeopardy are not my *real* hope, strength, and joy.” If you don’t work that into your heart before you pray about some matter, you will get no peace at all as you petition. There is no use petitioning God to help you continue to serve an idol!

4. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 4-5, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 4 he addresses what Kidner calls “the hot-heads” ⁴: “In your anger do not sin; when... on your beds... be silent.” This is a *bitter* heart. The second reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns may be that we are mishandling anger. Notice that the anger David critiques is the kind that makes you brood “on your beds.” Anger that simmers and makes you brood has at least two forms. On your bed you may be (1) “replaying the tapes” of what he/she/they did to you. This keeps the hurt alive and deepens the bitterness. Or you may be (2) planning an agenda that will “show them” or maybe even pay them back. This will, of course, have a terrible effect on your petition. Much of what we ask God for concerns the real or potential wrongdoing of others. There is a tremendous amount of injustice and

unfairness in life. We must, however, beware lest our petition only increase our bitterness, allowing us to feel justified in our anger as we pray.

Note: We saw in verses 2-3 that if we don't deal underlying idolatry in our hearts, our petitioning might lead to *greater* despair rather than less. In the same way, if we are not careful to deal with any underlying bitterness in our hearts, our praying might lead to *greater* anger. Why? One "feeder" of bitterness is a sense of superiority. You can't stay angry with people long term unless you feel "I would never act the way they did!" When you are praying to God about an issue, it can make you feel very "righteous" (in the wrong way). It may feed your bitterness. In that case, the praying will not increase the peace of your heart, but only the clamor. You will never get from verse 1 to verse 8!

In verses 4 and 5 David responds with wonderfully nuanced advice. First, he strikes one of the most difficult yet wise balances possible. The NIV masks this a bit when it renders it, "In your anger do not sin" (v. 4a). Notice that David assumes that anger itself is right. He does not say "Don't be angry," but rather "Don't sin with your anger." A more vivid and forceful translation is the RSV: "Be angry, but sin not." The balance is this. On the one hand, face squarely what is happening to you — the spite, the malice, the unfairness — and be angry about it. Don't make excuses for people. Don't paper over the wrongdoing, or you will find that your heart gets angry and you can't even admit it! Be angry. But, on the other hand, do two things that will keep you from plotting vengeance and being poisoned by your anger: First, "*search your heart*" means to humble yourself by remembering your own heart's flaws and sins. Second, "*trust in the LORD*" means to humble yourself by remembering that he knows best. Don't think you know what the other person deserves or how the world has to go now. ("Offer right sacrifices" may mean the same as, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate. . . . Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). David may be saying, "Give your injustice to God and let him deal with it. You don't have the power, the wisdom, or the right to judge others. You've had this burden all day. Now give it to the judge. Give it up to God. It's not yours now."

Paul picks this up verse from Psalm 4 in Ephesians 4:26 and he applies it this way: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry." The purpose of evening prayer is to forgive and send to God the injustices done to us. Then we can pray without bitterness.

5. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 6-7, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

In verse 6 he addresses what Kidner calls "the doleful."⁵ "Many are asking, 'Who can show us any good?'" This is a *self-pitying*, ungrateful heart. We can tell what the people mean by "good" by David's retort. They feel that they are

not prospering in the circumstances of life (see “their grain and new wine abound,” v. 7). These are people who feel that “nothing ever goes right for me.” They feel their lives do not have enough blessing. They want a prosperous, comfortable life, and this does not appear to be happening.

This is the third reason we find ourselves crushed and burdened by our concerns. We may have a definition of a good life and expectations about what God owes us that are not in line with biblical wisdom. How does David respond? Eugene Peterson puts it well. ⁶

“[This] contrast is between those who are perpetually asking God for what they do not have (v. 6) and those who are overwhelmed before God with what he has already given (v.7). St Francis de Sales divided the population similarly: the immature who are unhappy over what they don’t have, and the mature who are happy with what they [have already received from God].”

The overwhelming blessing we “already have” is stated in verse 6b: “the light of your face... upon us.” Verse 7 is then a remarkably powerful statement. “If I have the privileges of the gospel — the assurance of and access to the love, grace, and friendship of God — then everything else is ‘gravy.’” Years ago, the young Jonathan Edwards wrote a sermon ⁷ with the following outline:

1. Our bad things will turn out for good. (Rom. 8:28)
2. Our good things can never be taken away from us. (Ps. 4:6-7)
3. And the best things are yet to come. (1 Cor. 2:9)

David (and Edwards and Peterson!) here tells us that our petitions may be defiled by self-pity if unaccompanied by praise and thanksgiving for the miraculous, permanent blessings of salvation itself. We are to be amazed at our access to God (“light of your face”) and the “joy” of knowing we belong to God. Not until we put our temporal needs in perspective with the glory given and guaranteed will we be able to make petitions without getting deeper into worry and self-pity.

In summary: if, as we lay our requests to God, we find ourselves sinking deeper into despondency, anger, or self-pity, it is because we have failed to do this kind of heart work. We must be sure that the things we are asking for aren’t idols, or else our petition will make us only more discouraged; be sure that the things we are asking for do not enhance our anger and sense of superiority over others, or else our petition will only make us more bitter; and be sure that when we ask for things, we also rejoice and thank God for what we already have and cannot lose in the gospel.

Psalm 5: MORNING PRAYER

The evening prayer prepared our hearts for petition. Now, the morning prayer is the place where petitions are made. Eugene Peterson says, "Psalm 5 prays our reentry into the waking world's daylight... Morning prayer prepares for action. Passivity, in which we let God work his will in us [as in the evening Psalm 4] is primary, but activity, in which we obey the will worked in us in the world, is also essential." ⁸

1. What do verses 1-3 teach us about the attitudes and methods we should have as we petition God? How does verse 2 give us the "warrant" to come to God with our petitions?

First, we see a *spontaneous but disciplined* balance in method here. In verse 1, David calls attention to the "sighing" of the heart. His petitions are the deepest fears, hopes, concerns, and longings of his heart. They are his heart's spontaneous cries. However, in verse 3, he "lays" his requests before God in an orderly and systematic fashion. This is an important balance. On the one hand, it means we are to take a very careful inventory of everything weighing on our hearts, making our hearts "sigh." Every sighing should be made into a prayer. Otherwise, we will go through the day sinking under self-absorption, anxiety, self-pity, or anger. I have found that I need to get my "prayer list" from my heart. But, on the other hand it is not enough to just know the heart's concerns. We have to distill them and then deal with them in specific, orderly, regular (every morning!) petition. In summary, petition must be characterized by both order and ardor. We need to discover our own heart's deepest sighs, but then take the time and trouble to pray them in a disciplined way.

Second, we see an *active-passive* balance in attitude. This comes out in the phrase "wait in expectation" (v. 3) or, as it is sometimes translated, "watch." To "watch" or "wait in expectation" shows first an active, eager, hopeful attitude. We move out in confidence. We are not fearful, second-guessing, or looking over our shoulder. On the other hand, "watch" and "wait" mean that we are restraining ourselves from trying to answer God's prayers *for* him. We relax and allow him to act. We do not take revenge, we do not overwork, and we do not cut corners. We rest in the knowledge of his active care for us.

2. In Psalm 4:1, David seems assured that he will be answered by a righteous God. In Psalm 5:12, David is sure that he is “righteous” and will be heard. Why do we have even better resources than David did for knowing that “our righteous God” will certainly answer (v. 1)?

We know that God will answer us when we call (v. 1) because one terrible day he did not answer Jesus when *he* called. Jesus also called out to “my God,” but he was forsaken (Matt. 27:46). Jesus’ suffering and rejection, however, was done as our substitute (2 Cor. 5:21). *We* are the ones who deserve to be forsaken and to have our prayers rejected, because he is a “righteous God” (v. 1). Without Christ, verse 1 is rather unnerving. To call to a righteous God for an answer when we ourselves are so flawed is a mistake. The psalmist says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Ps. 66:18). But who of us can say we do not nurture sin in our hearts?

Jesus was given the prayer-rejection we deserved, so that we could have the prayer-reception he deserved (2 Cor. 5:21). We know that God will answer us when we call “my God” because God did not answer Jesus when he made the same petition on the cross. Now, the righteousness of God guarantees that he will answer us. God *must* hear us or he would be unjust, because our sins are paid for. Without Christ, God’s righteousness would guarantee that he would not hear us. With Christ, God’s righteousness guarantees that he will!

This is, perhaps, the ultimate way that petition unburdens the heart — when it is combined with the gospel. David knew intuitively that God would answer him, though in verse 5 he remembers that God will only answer him if he “offers right sacrifices.” The temple was a place to offer sacrifices to cover our sins. But we know that Jesus offered the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, it is remembering his sacrifice and our acceptance in him that assures us our petitions will be heard — and that he will answer us in the wisest way. If we are turned down, it is not because we are “unworthy” — it is only because our request wasn’t the wisest.

Jesus told us to pray “Our Father,” which is to remind us right up front that we go to God as his beloved children, adopted into the family. (1) Because we are *his* children, we know he is committed to us and *wants* to answer us. But (2) because we are his *children*, we know that we have “little” wisdom and may not always ask for the wisest thing. We have, though, the assurance that God will always give us what we *would* have asked for if we knew everything he knows.

This is all part of the assurance we have that goes deeper than David’s. How much better should we sleep at night than he did! Do we?

3. Summarize what we have learned about how to bring our petitions to God. (You may draw on what you studied last time.) Which of these principles do you most need to put into practice?

1. The goals of petitioning prayer are: put the world right, and put your heart at rest.
2. The qualities of petitioning prayer are: boldness, specificity, ardor, discipline, yet submission to God's will and wisdom. The boldness and submission come from knowing we are his children.
3. The accompanying prayers with petition are: repentance for idols — so we are not too despondent to pray; forgiveness of wrongdoers — so we are not too angry to pray; and gratitude and praise for grace in the gospel — so we are not too self-pitying to pray.
4. The basic assurance for petitioning prayer: we get the prayer-reception he deserved because he got the prayer-rejection we deserved.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), pp. 61-63.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 56.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 56.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p 56.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p 57.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, p. 63.

⁷ Author's paraphrase of the outline of Edwards's first sermon, "Christian Happiness." Original outline and sermon found in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 10*, Wilson Kimnach, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, pp. 64-65.

Psalms

Adoration I

Study 18 | Psalm 27

Psalm 27: "THE FAIR BEAUTY OF THE LORD"

1. Verse 1 announces that the psalm will address the problem of fear. Look at the whole psalm. What "fears" or threats does David face?

First, there is *external attack* and threat. (Verses 2-3: "evil men... my enemies... an army... war... against me.") Here we see the political and military enemies that are never far from David's mind. It reminds us of the brutality of ancient cultures and how governing power was taken and maintained. David may be giving a hypothetical case when he says, "Though an army besiege me." That may be happening, but it seems more likely that he is not literally facing it. Rather, he is saying, "I have something that will secure me even if this happens."

Secondly, there is *internal disappointment* and loss. (Verses 10-11: "Though my father and mother forsake me.") This again is probably only a hypothetical case; he probably is not literally facing this. Rather, he is running the gamut here, going from the most outward attack on his body to the greatest internal pain in the heart — rejection by parents. He is saying, "I have something that will secure me even if this happens."

In our day, we are less likely to be besieged by an army and more likely to be let down profoundly by our parents. Fathers and mothers have always been limited and finite in their love because they are sinners. But in a highly individualistic culture like ours, there is much less pressure put on parents to be responsible for their children. Perhaps there has never been a society in which more children have been forsaken literally or emotionally by their busy, self-actualizing parents.

Ernest Becker writes, "I think taking life seriously means that whatever you do must be done in the lived truth of the evil and terror of life, of the rumble of panic underneath everything — otherwise it is phony." ¹ The Bible gives us a strategy for living that does not minimize the "evil and terror" or the "rumble of panic underneath everything." It fully assumes that even fathers and mothers may not be there for us. David has an approach to life that can handle besieging armies and absent parents.

2. Verse 4. (a) What is David asking for in the first half of verse 4 — to go into the priesthood? If not, what? (b) Look at the second half of verse 4. What two things does David want to do in God’s house?

Note: Please use and reflect on this older (KJV) translation of verse 4b: “To *behold* the beauty of the LORD, and to *inquire* in his temple.” This is better than the NIV translation.

(a) What is David asking to do in verse 4a?

First, David seeks to “*dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life*” (v. 4). What does this mean? Priests and Levites literally lived in the temple, near the altar and Holy Place. It is unlikely that David is pondering his resignation as king in order to become a priest. Rather, he is yearning for the same kind of unbroken contact with the presence of God that is typified by a literal living in the temple courts. A very similar sentiment is expressed in Psalm 84:3: “Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself... a place near your altar.” The psalmist pictures himself as a bird that has flit about busily from place to place, but now at last has come home to God. What is desired is a sustained and profound sense of God’s reality and presence. The psalmists of 27 and 84 are both saying, “I’ve had intermittent times of fellowship with God, but now I’ve set my heart and feet toward the Lord in a new way. I want to constantly enjoy his presence.”

Notice the repetition at the beginning of verse 4. It is often translated, “One thing only I ask of the LORD; One thing only I will seek.” This is the language of deep and firm resolve. David is determined to find real and continual fellowship with God in prayer.

(b) What two things does David seek to do in the house of the Lord in verse 4b?

David desires to “*gaze upon the beauty of the LORD*” and to “*seek him in his temple*.” First, to “*gaze upon the beauty of the LORD*” is a striking phrase and perhaps the center of the psalm. What does it mean?

(1) To “*gaze*” (KJV, “*behold*”) means something much more than awareness. Gazing is like staring. We can’t help ourselves. We can’t get enough of the sight. We try to look and look because we want it imprinted on our mind for future replication and recall. Since David is probably not talking of a literal vision, we assume he is referring to the difference between intellectually knowing that God is great and actually finding a sense of God’s greatness and glory in the heart. Here is Jonathan Edwards’s classic account of the difference:

There is a twofold knowledge of good of which God has made the mind of man capable. The first, that which is merely notional... and the other is that which consists in the sense of the heart; as when the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. In the former is exercised merely... the understanding, in distinction from the... *disposition* of the soul. ...Thus there is a difference between having an *opinion* that God is holy and gracious, and having a *sense* of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former that knows not how honey tastes; but a man cannot have the latter unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind." ²

When we move from intellectual knowledge to a spiritual "sensing" of God, we are finding him beautiful. So to "gaze" is essentially the same as meditation. We ponder, reflect, and meditate on God's person, attributes, and deeds until we find them becoming spiritually real to our hearts.

(2) To gaze on his "beauty" speaks of another aspect of spiritual experience. While "gazing" refers to how God becomes spiritually real to us, "beauty" refers to how God becomes spiritually satisfying to us. Something is beautiful to us if we enjoy it for what it is in itself. For example, music that is beautiful is experienced as satisfying in itself. We don't listen to it in order to acquire something through it. It is an end in itself. Thus "to gaze on the beauty of the LORD" means to find him ravishing and satisfying just for who he is in himself. That is adoration. Unlike repentance (which asks for God's forgiveness) or petition (which asks for God's action) or even thanksgiving (which focuses on something God already has done for us), adoration is asking for nothing but God himself.

Second, to "inquire in his temple" means not so much a preoccupation with God's person as with his will.³ The word "inquire" means to seek an oracle. In the temple, the Urim and the Thummim were two stones on the priest's breastplate which could give yes or no answers from God. A person could inquire for a word from God through the Urim and Thummim or simply seek a prophecy. Today, of course, we have a source of God's will that is far better than a "one-off" prophecy or revelation. We have the Bible, the Word of God. This is where we can fruitfully "inquire."

The NIV translation of verse 5b is "to seek him in his temple." This is a poor translation, because it sounds like a repetition of what has come before. If we understand the meaning of the word "inquire" rightly, however, we get a wonderfully balanced picture of how to "go deeper" into God. We are not to do so simply with our intellect or simply through mystical experience. Derek Kidner says, "*To behold* and *to inquire*; a preoccupation with God's Person and His will. It is the essence... of discipleship." ⁴

3. Verses 5-6. What does David say will result from this kind of whole-hearted contemplation? Why?

In verse 6 he says, “*Then* my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.” When he says “*then*,” he is setting up a cause-effect relationship between the dwelling and gazing of verse 4 and the security, fearlessness, and confidence of verses 5-6. What is the nature of that confidence?

Does he mean in verse 6 that his enemies will literally be unable to touch him or attack him because he will be worshiping in the tabernacle? That is unlikely. If enemies wanted to attack him, they could either walk into the tabernacle or wait for him to come out. This must mean that the contemplation of God itself dissolves his fears. His mind, in a sense, is taken off himself. This is very mysterious when it happens.

Christian experience follows suit here. When sensations of God’s beauty fill you with joy, the confidence that flows out does not consist of some certainty that somehow God will not let anything bad occur. Rather, you become so full of joy in God, and so aware that neither death nor life, neither defeat nor victory will break your relationship with him (see Psalm 23:6 and Romans 8:38), that the circumstances of this life cease to bother you. The wisdom of God is so real that you rest somewhat in his purposes. His glory is so real that your own reputation and prospects don’t seem quite as important. This does not make you passive; rather, it “*lifts your head*” above your enemies (v. 6).

4. Verses 7-14. The exuberant prospect of verses 4-6 is not a current reality. David does not yet have this triumphant experience of God. How, then, does he pray and prepare his life for the presence of God?

Just as Elijah built an altar, laid out a sacrifice, and prayed for God’s fire to come down (1 Kings 18), so we have to prepare our own lives and hearts for visitation by God, a deeper experience of him. This image of preparing an altar is helpful because it shows that we are not to be passive. It also shows us that we are not in control. There is no formula that automatically connects us to God. We ultimately rely on God to come to us.

First, we see that David is repentant and asking for mercy despite his sins. Both verse 7 (“*be merciful to me*”) and verse 9 (“*Do not hide your face... in anger*”) show that he recognizes that he does not deserve the presence of God. He is confessing his sin and repenting.

Second, we see David express his willingness to rearrange his life to be more obedient (v. 11). Kidner observes, “David is not only a worshiper seeking God’s face (v. 8); he is a pilgrim committed to his way (v. 11). He is very much in the world, and a prayer for a ‘*level path*’ is not for comfort but for sure progress (as

a moral term it implies what is right, or straight) when the merest slip would be exploited.”⁵

Third, he reminds himself of God’s promises and his nature, in order to build his own confidence that God will let him into his presence. He reminds himself that God has been “my helper” in the past (v. 9b), that God is more to be trusted than even parents (v. 10), that God wants to show us goodness in this life (v. 13).

Lastly, David “seeks his face” (v. 8). This is almost certainly the same thing as “gazing on the beauty of the LORD” (v. 4) — meditating on and adoring God. However, he mentions that “my heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’” (v. 8a). This seems to mean that he believes that God himself has put it in his heart to seek him. (Some translations say, “You have said to my heart, ‘seek my face.’”) The psalmist encourages himself that his longing and even his sense of God’s absence are signs that God is with him. He only longs for God because God put it in his heart to do so. “He will not ask for our love (v. 8a) and then withhold his own (v. 9a),” says Kidner.⁶

Summary: In verses 4-6, David foresees three stages to going deeper into God. First, *dwelling* (v. 4a). He is going to make sustained prayer and fellowship with God a new priority. This is his new resolve and discipline. No longer will he simply seek God in fits and starts, or only when there is a crisis. He is going to dwell with God. Second, *gazing* and *inquiring* (v. 4b). He is going to meditate on the truth and contemplate the Lord till he breaks through and senses his beauty. Third, *sacrificing with shouts of joy* (v. 6). He knows that eventually, there will be such a deep joy in worship that his head will be lifted up and he will fear no enemy.

However, in verses 7-14, David hunkers down for the long road to the joy of verses 4-6. He knows it will take much time and effort to bring his heart into routine communion with God. In verses 7-14, he begins to “lay the altar”: he repents, obeys, remembers, prays, and rests in the assurance that God must want him, or else he would not want God.

¹ Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

² Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” Sermon, 1734, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol.2* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 114.

³ See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 121.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 121.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 121.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 121.

Psalms

Adoration II

Study 19 | Psalm 63

Psalm 63: MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU

1. What signs of real spiritual experience can we read in verses 1-5?

First, there is an *appetite* for God. There is a sense of his absence that is very strong here. It is characterized as dying of thirst. Death by thirst is an extremely painful way to expire, so David is describing his desire for God in the most poignant terms. As we saw in Psalm 27, however, spiritual thirst is a very strong sign of spiritual life. As we noted in Psalm 27:8, we would not have a sense of his absence unless his love was already in our hearts. We only miss people we like or love. Romans 3:9-10 says categorically that the natural heart will never seek God. So any seeking of God we do is due to God's ongoing work in our hearts.

Second, there is a *new sense of God in the heart*. While Psalm 27 looked forward to this experience, here we see that David has received it. It has occurred. "I *have* seen you... and beheld your power and your glory." This experience is deeply satisfying, as vividly stated in verse 5: "My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods."

Third, there is a *realization of grace*. In verse 3 the NIV translation again disappoints. The word there is *chesedh*, which we have often mentioned in these studies. It means God's covenant love, his saving love, his unmerited, saving grace. (Many translations translate this as "steadfast love" or "lovingkindness".) This is "unbudging" love, immovable commitment. Notice what happens to the psalmist when he has a taste of the glory and power of this love. He says, "Because your grace-love is *better* than life..." What a statement! (This sheds light on why David can say in Psalm 27 that God's beauty releases him from any fear of his enemies.) David is saying, "God's gracious love is not only better than anything *in* life, but it is even better than *life* itself. If I have this, I'm not even all that worried about dying." Again we are back to the idea of God's beauty. The psalmist does not value God's love because "it strengthens me so I can reach my goals." Rather, God's love is an end in itself. A primary mark of real Christian experience is that you come to love God for the shining, satisfying magnificence of who he is in himself, and not how he benefits you.

To religious people, God is useful. To Christians, God is beautiful.

2. How, practically, does David find God as he contemplates in the sanctuary?

First, David *praises* God (vv. 3-4). "My lips will glorify you" and "I will praise you as long as I live." Notice that this is a cycle. Praise is a *result* of contemplation. Verse 3b is the result of verse 3a: "Because [I find] your love

better than life, my lips will glorify you.” But, on the other hand, in verse 4 we see a resolve to praise and lift up hands, which results in verse 5: “My soul *will* [then] be satisfied as with the richest of foods.” So praise and adoration, through singing and prayer, are not just the result of the contemplation of God, but also its major means.

C. S. Lewis expresses it well:

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed. ... This is so even when our expressions are inadequate, as of course they usually are. But how if one could really and fully praise even such things to perfection — utterly “get out” in poetry or music or paint the upsurge of appreciation which almost bursts you? Then indeed the object would be fully appreciated and our delight would have attained perfect development. ... It is along these lines that I find it easiest to understand the Christian doctrine that “Heaven” is a state in which angels now, and men hereafter, are perpetually employed in praising God. ... To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God — drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify him, God is inviting us to enjoy him. ¹

Second, David uses constant *meditation*. Verse 6: “On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.” Here we see that David is praying and meditating constantly. (Earlier studies in this series discuss meditation in detail.)

3. What are some of the results of this meditation and adoration in David’s life?

First, we see that he has *confidence and assurance*. He “sings in the shadow of your wings” (v. 7), and “my soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me” (v. 8). This is a quieter expression of the same idea voiced in Psalm 27:6.

Second, we see that a *reassertion of identity*. He says, “But *the king* will rejoice in God” (v. 11). Derek Kidner writes, The term “the king” is “surely more than a synonym for ‘I.’ If this is written from his banishment at the hands of Absalom [see heading], the royal title becomes a reassertion of his calling, which was from God, and an avowal that this cannot fail. A Christian parallel,

one of many, can be found in the doxology of John the prisoner, who praises God even from Patmos for the liberty and royal priesthood which are his birthright and ours (Rev. 1:5f.) If David's faith in his kingly calling was well-founded, still more is the Christian's." ²

The more we penetrate the reality of who God really is, the more we shall be confident and clear about who we really are. Our sonship and royal adoption will fill us with power.

4. Read this psalm from a Christ-centered perspective. How can we be even more certain than David (v. 12) that our spiritual thirst will not be permanent (v. 1)? Consider John 4:1-26 and John 19:28-29.

Our spiritual thirst is temporary only because Jesus received the ultimate loss of God on the cross. There he cried out "I thirst" because his physical pain was only a type of the infinite spiritual thirst and torment he experienced for us. He went out into the *real* desert when he was rejected by God on the cross and experienced the pains of hell for us. Because of his thirst, he gives us the "water of life" (see John 4 and Rev. 21:6).

5. What in this psalm and Psalm 27 was most helpful to you personally? Why? What practical difference will this make in your life?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1986, 1958), pp. 95-97.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 227.

Psalms

Adoration III

Study 20 | Psalms 95 & 150

Psalm 95: "THE VENITE"

Introduction

From its earliest days, the Christian Church has used Psalm 95 as a guide to praise and worship. Called "The Venite" (from the Latin form of the first words, "O come"), it has always been seen as a near perfect "how to" guide for worship. The ending seems so surprisingly severe that many have felt that it was added later by an editor. As usual, this kind of theory assumes an editor who is a total idiot. Why would an editor simply append this warning to a beautiful psalm on worship if it had nothing at all to do with the subject? We shall see that it has much to tell us about worship.

- 1. Verses 1-2. These two verses seem very familiar (we may have heard them often), but they are packed with facts about worship. What do we learn about what worship is and how we are to do it?**

First, worship is best done *corporately*. We learn that from the very first sentence: "Let *us* sing." We are to worship with other believers. This parallels Jesus' own instruction. When he gave us a model for prayer, he told us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." Of course, there is ample evidence that the Bible calls us to deep, personal, and individual prayer. But that is more of a means to the end of corporate worship. After all, in heaven the corporate nature of worship is the primary form.

Second, worship is intended to *engage the whole person*. We learn of emotional engagement by the verbs: "sing for joy" and "shout aloud" and "extol with music." But we learn of intellectual engagement by the nouns: "the LORD" (the covenant name *Yahweh*) and "the Rock of our salvation." These terms are meaningless without a knowledge of biblical history and theology. *Yahweh* is, of course, the name God revealed to Moses in the burning bush; it is the name he is called by those in a personal, committed, saving relationship with him. "The Rock" is a name that also goes back to the ministry of Moses (see Exodus 17). So worship engages the whole person, head and heart.

Third, worship is to *involve music*. It is often overlooked how often the Bible actually *commands* us to worship God with "music and song" as it does here. Intuitively, this makes perfect sense, but it is not easy to explain. Music has an inexplicable power over us. The very same words spoken and recited have a greatly enhanced power when they are sung to great music. The quote by C. S. Lewis cited near the end of the study on Psalm 63 is relevant again.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment... the delight is incomplete till it is expressed... if one could really and fully praise [anything] to perfection — utterly “get out” in poetry or music or paint the upsurge of appreciation which almost bursts you... then indeed the object would be fully appreciated and our delight would have attained perfect development. ¹

The probable reason that music is necessary is that we cannot truly enjoy or glorify God to the fullest extent of our capabilities if we do not use music. Visual artists are often disappointed that there are not similar biblical injunctions to “praise him with sculpture and painting,” etc. Of course, Christian artists *are* called to glorify God with their work, but an entire congregation cannot participate in making a painting together, while it can participate in making a song together. Thus music is the best art form to unite individuals in corporate worship (everyone praising at once), and to unite each individual’s head and heart — the whole person — in praise.

Fourth, worship seeks to *come before him*, into his presence. This is critical to real worship. God is, in one sense, omnipresent and everywhere (Ps. 139). Yet there is another sense in which we can be “cast away from thy presence” (Ps. 51) and we need to seek his “face” and his presence, as we saw in Psalm 27. To “come before him” therefore has a couple of different meanings. First, it means to come before him as we do a king. It is to acknowledge his kingship and submit to him. Second, it means to come before him as we do a friend. When we want an intimate conversation, we meet face to face and look one another in the eye. There is real personal interaction. Third, to “come into his presence” means that the Holy Spirit works on our hearts to give us a sense of his reality and nearness. Therefore, in worship, we are seeking the same: submission, intimacy, and a sense of his reality.

2. Verses 3-5. If the first two verses give us the “what?” of worship, these three verses give us the “why?” of worship. (The word “for” or “because” at the beginning of verse 3 indicates this.) Why are we to worship him?

Verses 3-5 give us both a specific and a general reason for worship. The specific reason we worship him is that *he is the supreme Creator*. Literally everything belongs to him because he created it. The two contrasts — “depths... peaks” and “sea... land” — are extremes to show that God owns everything in between as well. Why does the psalmist bring out creation as a reason for worship? Surely we can also worship him for other attributes: why not glory, wisdom, mercy, and so on? Well, of course we can, but the fact of creation underscores that nothing else can be *worthy* of worship. Human beings worship whatever they make an ultimate, non-negotiable value, yet everything *but* God is actually penultimate, finite, and created. Everything else is not only shaped by his hand (v. 5) but held (up) in his hand (v. 4). Thus the psalmist enjoins us, “Worship only him.”

It can't be an accident that God is called here "King above all gods." Does this mean that the psalmist is a polytheist who believes there are other gods but the LORD is the strongest one? No; he simply knows that human beings are worshipers by design; we cannot live without giving *something* ultimate value or worship. Lamentably, we tend to make gods of created things instead of merely enjoying them, so the psalmist urges us to transfer our worship to God, the only one worthy of our imagination, our passion, and our ultimate allegiance.

The general reason we worship God is that *he has revealed himself in his Word*. This is easily missed. Why are we to worship God? The psalmist says, "Because he is great... because he is our Maker... because he is our shepherd." But how does he know this? This is the truth God revealed regarding himself through the prophets. In other words, worship is not pure mysticism. It starts with and responds to the truth of God's Word. Over and over again we see this pattern in the Bible. God reveals his holiness to Isaiah and the prophet leaps forward to offer himself in service (Is. 6). God reveals himself to Jacob in a dream and Jacob wakes up and worships (Gen. 28:10-22). There is, then, a rhythm to worship. First, God reveals his worth (in his Word we learn he is Maker and shepherd), and then we respond by giving him what he's worth (our praise, our talents, our sins, our hearts, our loyalty, our needs, our money, our selves). We see the rhythm even here. Psalm 95:1-2 is a gift offering of worship in response to the truths of verses 3-5. Thus, in nearly all historic forms of worship, a word of Scripture is read, sung, chanted, recited, or expounded, and in response, the people pray, praise, give offerings, confess sins, receive pardon, observe sacraments, and so on. Every service usually follows this rhythm.

In summary, we worship God because (1) he alone is big enough for our worship-needing and worship-owing hearts, and (2) he has revealed himself in his Word.

3. Verses 6-7b. After the rejoicing of the first five verses, a different note is struck. (a) Compare and contrast the calls of verses 1 and 6. Why the difference? (b) How do verses 6-7 follow naturally from verses 1-5?

(a) Compare and contrast the calls of verses 1 and 6.

The call of verse 1 is "Come let us sing for joy... let us shout aloud," while the call of verse 6 is to "Come, let us bow down... let us kneel." The first verse is a call to exuberant rejoicing, but the second is a call to humble submission. Kidner says, "Each of the three main verbs of verse 6 is concerned with getting low before God, since the standard [Hebrew] word for 'worship' in Scripture means [literally] to prostrate oneself: e.g. Abraham in Genesis 18:2." ² Notice another difference. While the rejoicing of verses 1-2 is grounded in the truth of God as creator (vv. 3-5), the humble submission of verses 6-7b is grounded in

the truth of God as a shepherd (“the flock under his care”) and as a covenant-maker. “Our God” (v. 7) is a term God says may be only used by the people who have a personal covenant relationship with him (Ex. 6:7). This, then, is remembering that he is “our God” of *redemption* and grace in history, while verses 1-5 were celebrating that he is a “great God” of all *creation*.

Why the difference? Both notes — of adoration and repentance, must be struck. Without a sober remembrance of our smallness and our need of his mercy, “the ‘joyful noise’ of the opening will be shrill and self-indulgent.”³

(b) How do verses 6-7 follow from verses 1-5?

The note of confession and repentance will always follow naturally, as a consequence, of real praise and adoration. In Isaiah 6, a revelation of God’s holiness leads Isaiah into repentance, crying “I am a man of unclean lips” (v. 5) and into an assurance of pardon (v. 7: “your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”) In Luke 5, a revelation of Jesus’ power (through the miracle of the enormous catch of fish) leads Peter into repentance, crying, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (v. 8). The closer we get to a source of great light, the easier it is to see ourselves. So the more we see what God is truly like, the more we see what we truly are like.

4. Verses 7c-11. This passage of warning seems dissonant at first reading. (a) What does it tell us about how we are supposed to worship? (b) Assume that this is a third stage to an act of worship, after verses 1-5 (praise) and verses 6-7 (repentance). What is this stage? (c) What does the summons to “rest” have to do with worship and hearing God’s Word in faith? (Read Hebrews 4:1-13.)

(a) What does this tell us about how to worship?

First, this tells us that “hearing his voice” (v. 7c) is one of the main acts of worship. To drive the point home, notice that in verse 7c there is a change of speaker and voice. This is God himself speaking to us now in the first person. It is an oracle from God. In the same way, during any worship service we are to have a time of sustained listening to God’s Word directly.

These final verses are not really a change of subject as some have stated, unless you forget that listening and learning from the Word of God is one of the central components of worship. Kidner reminds us that “to ‘hear’ or ‘hearken to’ has often the added dimension in Hebrew of ‘obey,’ for which the Old Testament has virtually no other word (cf... 1 Sam.15:22).”⁴ So we have here a direction that we must (1) listen to God’s word (v. 7c), (2) soften our hearts under it (v. 8), and (3) offer ourselves in obedience.

(b) Assume that this is a third stage in worship; what is it?

We have already shown that Psalm 95:1-7 breaks into two stages of worship that are psychologically natural. The first stage is an act of entrance in which we consciously seek the presence of God, remind ourselves of his greatness, and sing his praises loudly. The second stage is an act of renewal in which we bow low before him, remembering our need for mercy and all his redemptive actions in the past. Now the third stage is a time of listening to God's Word carefully and willingly, and offering ourselves in deeper obedience to it. So our three stages look like this:

Acts of Entrance: Look Up (Psalm 95:1-5)	Praise and Adoration of His Greatness <i>Gaining perspective on who he is</i> Result: <u>JOY</u>
Acts of Renewal: Look In (Psalm 95:6-7b)	Repentance and Assurance of His Love <i>Gaining perspective on who we are</i> Result: <u>HUMILITY</u>
Acts of Offering: Look Ahead (Psalm 95:7c-11)	Hearing and Acting on His Word <i>Gaining perspective on who we are in him</i> Result: <u>GOSPEL REST</u>

(c) What do the summons to "rest" and Hebrews 4:1-13 have to do with worship?

The references to "Meribah" and "Massah" are to times of crisis in the wilderness wanderings when either the people or Moses failed to trust God's promises (see Ex. 17:1-7 and Num. 20:1-13). The effect of their continued lack of faith was that they could not enter the rest of the Promised Land. God had to have the entire first generation of Israelites die off before he took their children into the land of rest (Num. 14:1-45). In the same way, we are being warned here that we must respond with a "soft," believing heart to the Word of God. But what does "rest" mean to us, now? According to Derek Kidner:

"My rest" is pregnant with more than one meaning, as Hebrews 3 and 4 make clear. In relation to the Exodus it meant God's land to settle in. ...But Hebrews 4:1-13 argues that the psalm still offers us, by its emphatic *Today* [v. 7c] a rest beyond anything that Joshua won, namely a share in God's own sabbath rest: the enjoyment of His finished work not merely of creation but of redemption. The quitters who turned back to the wilderness... may be but pale shadows of ourselves, if we draw back from our great inheritance."⁵

Kidner is showing us that the final purpose of the worship service is to listen to the gospel that *God's redemptive work is "finished"* (John 19:30). When we realize that God has saved us solely by grace through Christ's merits, then we "rest from [our] work" (Heb. 4:10). This is an image of God's Sabbath rest, when he "rested from his work." In every worship service, we enter into rest when we remember the finished work of Christ for us. Then we take our worship off of false gods (Ps. 95:3) through which we seek to save ourselves, and we give our heart's worship to him alone.

Psalm 150: PRAISE THE LORD

1. Verse 1 tells us where the LORD is to be praised. What does it tell us?

“In his sanctuary” evidently refers to temple worshipers here on earth, and “in his mighty heavens” probably refers to his worshipers in heaven. In other words, he is to be praised everywhere — in *everything*. “His glory fills the universe; His praise must do no less.” ⁶

2. Verse 2 tells why the LORD is to be praised. What does it tell us?

“His acts of power” refers to everything he does, while “his surpassing greatness” refers to everything he is. This verse covers both his person and his work. In other words, he is to be praised comprehensively — for *everything*.

3. Verse 3-5 tells us how the LORD is to be praised. What does it tell us?

At first glance, it appears that the psalmist has just given us an arbitrary list of musical instruments, but scholarly commentary on this list is very illuminating. Kidner writes:

Various sides of life are touched on in this short list: great national and sacred occasions, by the *trumpet* blast; ...joyous celebrations, *e.g.*, of a victory, by the *timbrel and dance*... [and] simple music-making, to judge by the everyday associations of the *pipe* or flute... [E]very kind of instrument, solemn or gay, percussive or melodic, gentle or strident, is rallied here for the praise of God.” ⁷

In other words, he is to be praised resourcefully — with *everything*.

4. Verse 6 tells us who is to praise the LORD. What does it tell us?

Some want to limit this phrase to “all humankind,” but that seems “unduly narrow” ⁸ in light of Revelation 5:13: “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!’” So verse 6 is saying “every living creature” will praise God. Why is this so radical? Psalm 19 also tells us that the inanimate creation tells of the glory of God. Romans 8:18 tells us that all creation is “groaning” until it can be liberated into perfect praise of God. What will make the new heavens and new earth glorious and magnificent is that they will praise God as they were designed.

So: Where? Praise *in* everything.
Why? Praise *for* everything.
How? Praise *with* everything.
Who? Praise *by* everything.

5. We discussed why Psalm 1 was put at the beginning of the Psalter. Why is Psalm 150 put at the end?

Eugene Peterson summarizes it well:

All [true] prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise. Any prayer, no matter how desperate its origin, no matter how angry and fearful the experiences it traverses, ends up in praise. It does not always get there quickly or easily — the trip can take a lifetime — but the end is always praise... There are intimations of this throughout the Psalms. Not infrequently, in the middle of a terrible lament, defying logic and without transition, praise erupts. Psalm 13, for instance...

Psalm 150 does not stand alone; four more hallelujah psalms are inserted in front of it so that it becomes the fifth of five psalms that conclude the Psalter... These five hallelujah psalms are extraordinarily robust. [This means]... no matter how much we suffer, no matter our doubts, no matter how angry we get, no matter how many times we have asked in desperation or doubt, "How long?," prayer develops finally into praise. Everything finds its way to the doorstep of praise.

...This is not to say that other prayers are inferior to praise, only that all prayer pursued far enough, becomes praise... Don't rush it. It may take years, decades even, before certain prayers arrive at the hallelujahs, at Psalms 146-150... Not every prayer is capped off with praise. In fact, most prayers, if the Psalter is a true guide, are not. But... prayer is always reaching toward praise and will finally arrive there.

So... our lives fill out in goodness. Earth and heaven meet in an extraordinary conjunction. Clashing cymbals announce the glory. Blessing. Amen. Hallelujah. ⁹

6. Have some very difficult prayers of yours developed into praise?

7. What in these two psalms was most helpful to you personally? Why? What practical difference will this make in your life?

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1986, 1958), p. 95.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 345.

³ Derek Kidner, p. 345.

⁴ Derek Kidner, p. 345.

⁵ Derek Kidner, p. 346.

⁶ Derek Kidner, p. 491.

⁷ Derek Kidner, p. 491.

⁸ Derek Kidner, p. 492.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), pp. 122, 123, 127, 128.

Psalms

Two ways to pray the Psalms

Appendix A

The Psalms have long been used in prayer by believers. Here are two ways you can join in.

Praying the Daily Office

This method is based on the *Book of Common Prayer*. It enables you to pray (selectively) through the book of Psalms every month, in morning and evening prayer times of fifteen to twenty minutes.

1. Read one or more psalms selected by the schedule. Read in the NIV.

2. Choose one or two verses to meditate on, using TACTS.

Teaching: About who God is and what he's done; about who we are and what we should do.

Adoration: How can I love and praise God on the basis of this? Pray the truth/text back to him.

Confession: How am I failing to realize this in my life? Confess the truth/text back to God.

Thanks: How is Christ the ultimate revelation of this truth and the ultimate answer to this sin of mine? Thank him that he is!

Supplication: How does this show me what I should or can be and do? Ask him for it.

"Colloquy": Speak to God about each element and imagine (biblically) his response to each one.

3. Pray the psalm to God (using the Coverdale or some similar version).

MONTHLY SCHEDULE

	<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>
1	1-4	6-8	8	38-40	41-43	15	75-77	78	22	107	108-109
2	9-11	12-13	9	44-46	47-49	16	79-81	82-85	23	110-113	114-115
3	15-17	18	10	50-52	53-55	17	86-88	89	24	116-118	119:1-32
4	19-21	22-23	11	56-58	59-61	18	90-92	93-94	25	119:33-72	119:73-104
5	24-26	27-29	12	62-64	65-67	19	95-97	98-101	26	119:105-144	119:145-176
6	30-31	32-34	13	68	69-70	20	102-103	104	27	120-125	126-131
7	35-36	37	14	71-72	73-74	21	105	106	28	132-135	136-138
									29	139-140	141-143
									30	144-146	147-150

Stream Prayer

This method enables you to meditate on a psalm and apply it to your life as you pray. (See Part I of the Introduction for an example of this method using Psalm 116.) It is fine to do one psalm at a time. However, if you would like to do more than one, the categories below allow you to choose from several types of psalms for a breadth of expression. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes if you do multiple psalms.

- 1. Choose a psalm and read it once for comprehension. If time permits, choose psalms from the Praise, Renewal and Commitment categories. Add a Teaching psalm between Renewal and Commitment if time allows.**
- 2. Pray the 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.
 - (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.
 - (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.
- 3. Move on to the next psalm and do the same thing.**

PSALM CATEGORIES

!	Praise	/+	Aspiration
?	Lament	T	Thanksgiving
∨	Penitential	W	Wisdom
>	Confidence	R	Royal

Note: The symbols in red can be used to indicate various types of psalms in your Bible or journal.

! PRAISE

Creation/glory/holiness 8, 19.5, 24, 65, 99, 104, 115, 145, 148

Grace/Redemption/mercy (see also "Thanks") 19.5, 98, 100, 111, 113, 114, 117, 122, 147, 149

Wisdom/Sovereignty over/justice 29, 47, 89.5, 96, 97, 139.5, 146

Worship itself 33, (67), 92, 95, 135, 150

RENEWAL

∨ Confession of sin 6, (25), 32, 38, 51, 79, 90, 106, 130, 143

? Lament (confession of need)

(Deserted by God) 13, 22, 39, 42-44, 60, 69, 73-74, 77, 79-80, 85, 88, 89.5, 137

(Despair) 39, 88

(Enemies) 3, 10, 12, 35, 54-55, 59, 64, 70, 83, 94, 102, 109, 120, 140, 142-43

(Justice cries) 58, 109, 137, 139.5

COMMITMENT

T Thanks 18, 30, 34, 40, 66, 75, 78, 103, 105, 107, 116, 124, 136, 138

/+ Aspiration/longing 5, 17, 27, 63, 67, 84, 86, 101, 108, (119), 123, 126, 131, 141

> Confidence (Personal) 4, 7, 9, 11, 16, 23, 25, 26, 28, 31, 41, 52, 56-57, 61-62, 71, 91, 118, 121, 129, 144

Confidence (Kingdom) 46, 48, 68, 76, 82, 87, 93, 94, 125, 132-134

TEACHING

R Royal/Messianic 2, 20, 21, (22), 45, 72, 110, (118)

W Wisdom 1, 14, 15, 36, 37, 49, 50, 53, 81, 112, 119, 127, 128

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.

Psalms

Praying with the Psalms

Introduction Part II

STUDYING THE PSALMS

The goal of this study is to learn how to read the Psalms to enrich and inform your own prayers. It will be much easier to pray a psalm after you've first studied it. If you don't understand it, you will find it hard to meditate or pray it.

Here is a format for studying a psalm on your own:

1. Read the psalm through a couple of times.
2. Decide the *main theme* in a single phrase or sentence.
2. *Outline* it, summarizing each section in a paraphrased sentence, relating its content to the theme.
4. When done, you may wish to give a *title* to it and revise the *theme*.
5. Write down how to pray this psalm in light of *Christ*, seeing Christ praying it and/or praying it to him.
6. Write *meditation thoughts*: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

PSALM 4 AS AN EXAMPLE

Read Psalm 4 as a group and consider this analysis.

Psalm 4: Unconditional Joy

Theme: How to have joy and delight apart from circumstances.

Outline

Verse 1. The Source of my joy: "My righteous God." He is righteous and yet he is *my* God — he is for me! He is a God of love *and* righteousness.

Verses 2-3. Application #1 to *divided* hearts. The first reason we don't have joy and delight in all circumstances is because we have divided hearts. Get rid of idols! You are chosen by grace for *intimacy* ("himself"). You can't serve God and idols — that is why you don't have intimacy. Without intimacy with God, you can't live a stable life.

Verses 4-5. Application #2 to *bitter* hearts. The second reason we don't have joy and delight in all circumstances is because we often are bitter and resentful.

Get rid of anger! How? You should live in *humility* (“search your hearts”). Trust him (v. 5); don’t think you know best. Humble yourself.

Verses 6-7. Application #3 to suffering hearts. If we have worked on intimacy and humility, then in suffering we will have the light of God’s “face” (v. 6b) and it will get us through.

With Christ

Verse 1 refers both to God’s upholding of justice in general and his commitment to me. How could he be both for justice *and* for me? Only through Jesus Christ! Because of Jesus’ life and death, God can be “both just and Justifier of those who believe.” Only in Jesus Christ can he truly be “my righteous God” (both “righteous” yet “my”). Only praying verse 1 in Christ will make the rest of the psalm active. When I see what Christ has done, only then can I be sure God will always answer me (v. 1). Only then can I truly love him instead of idols and humble myself so I am not always angry. Only then can I truly know he is working in my suffering, as he worked in Christ’s. **Addendum:** I know God will answer me when I call (v. 1) because one terrible day, he did not answer Jesus when he called out, “My God” (Matt. 27:46).

Praying It

Adoration: (1) That God is a righteous God. (2) That he is “my” God — a personal God who is for me. (3) That in Christ he can be both.

Confession: (1) I tend to get angry in bed, not humbler! I tend to think about my troubles and get resentful that my life isn’t going well. Forgive me. (2) Forgive me my idols.

Thanksgiving: (1) Thank you that you have not held my petty resentments toward you against me. (2) Thank you that in Jesus Christ, you answer me, because one day you didn’t answer him. (3) Thank you that in Jesus Christ’s suffering, I see an example of how you can work through pain and trouble.

Supplication: (1) Help me to sleep (v. 8)! Let these truths really affect my heart so I have your peace. (2) Let me see the light of your face (v. 6). I know so little of that.

GROUP EXERCISE: READ PSALMS 133 AND 134

1. What is the main theme?

2. How would you outline this psalm?

With Christ

3. What light is shed when I imagine Christ praying this psalm in any of its parts?

4. How can we pray this psalm to Christ in any of its parts?

Praying It

5. Adorations:

6. Confessions:

7. Thanksgivings:

8. Supplications:

6. List any ways that (a) Jesus Christ sheds light on Psalm 1, and (b) Psalm 1 sheds light on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Psalm

Meditation II

Study 2 | Psalm 2

PSALM 2

- 1. Compare Psalm 2:1-3 with Psalm 1:1-3. How would you characterize the differences in subject matter and orientation?**
- 2. Ironically, the words “meditate” in Psalm 1:2 and “plot” in Psalm 2:1 are the very same word in Hebrew. How is the use of the word the same in both psalms? How is it different?**
- 3. In verses 4-6, what is God’s attitude toward the supposed power of the nations? Why is the belief of verse 3 so laughable? (See the reasons in verse 1.) Why do we need that perspective when we pray?**

4. In verses 6-7, what is God's answer to the world's evil and injustice? What do we learn about this "King" in verses 6-12?

5. How does the beatitude in verse 12 contradict the mindset of verses 1-3?

- 3. What do we learn about what we should do with Scripture in order to benefit from it? (List the different terms and reflect on what they tell you about what you should be doing with the Scriptures.)**

Psalms

Meditation V

Study 5 | Psalms 56 and 77

Introduction

We continue to study psalms that teach us about meditation and prayer. Psalm 1 taught us that meditation is, in a sense, the “gateway” or foundation for deeper prayer. One of the reasons our prayer lives are so superficial is that we do not meditate as a preliminary to prayer. Psalm 119 taught us that the primary object of meditation is the revelation of God in Scripture. The following psalms have more to teach us about meditation and prayer. We will look at Psalms 56 and 77 and, next time, at Psalm 103.

PSALM 56

1. What situation is the psalmist facing?

2. What does David do in response to his fears and these dangers (vv. 4, 10)?

4. What remarkable claims are made about the believer's status before God in verses 8-19? Which of these claims do you most need to grasp personally right now? How does the work of Christ shed light on these claims?

5. What do all the individuals in verses 20-22 have in common?

6. Meditating on Christ has been called "preaching the gospel to yourself." Summarize all the things you learn about preaching the gospel to your own heart from this psalm.

4. Do you find David's attitude in argumentative prayer legitimate? Assuming it is basically legitimate, how does it contradict many common views on how to approach God in prayer and faith?

5. When are tears (of sorrow) a sign of spiritual strength and character? Are David's tears a sign of spiritual strength?

6. Does David get an answer to his prayer? How does he get it?

6. What has your experience been with repentance? Does it lead to winsome joy and less sensitivity to criticism, or does it lead to inferiority and increased sensitivity? Why? What have you learned in this study that will be of the most help to you?

7. Read 2 Samuel 12:15-25. Why do you think David's son dies? Is that punishment? What assurance do we have today that God does not punish us for our sins like that?

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 189-194.

3. Verses 5-8. (a) What is the goal of the psalmist's repentance? (b) Why do we "wait" in repentance? How are we to "wait" in repentance?

4. Verse 8. What hint does the psalmist get in this last verse about how God will be able to give us such a full forgiveness?

6. Verses 24-27. What is the fifth kind of sin the psalmist remembers and confesses? What examples of this have you seen in yourself or in others?

7. Verses 32-33. What is the sin being confessed here? What examples of this have you have seen in yourself or in others?

8. Verses 40-48. Why has God saved Israel despite her sins?

Psalms

Sorrowing I

Study 11 | Psalm 3

Introduction

The skill of “praying our troubles and sorrows” is often overlooked as such. When we think of the essential forms of prayer, we think of adoration (and its close cousin, thanksgiving), repenting, and petitioning. Praying our suffering is not a different form of prayer that parallels these. But praising, petitioning, and repenting *in the midst of* suffering is so critical for spiritual growth (and survival!) that it should be considered as a subject on its own. Most of us just stop praying when we are suffering, or put up nothing but the occasional, brief petition asking for relief. But the Lament Psalms show that the right thing to do is to *process* our suffering through sustained prayer.

Psalm 3: HOW TO SLEEP WELL

Introduction

This is the first psalm with a title linking it to David’s life. Second Samuel 15-18 tells the story of David’s son, Absalom, who led a coup to overthrow him as king and kill him.

- 1. Give a name to each of the following sermon sections: verses 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8. What progression do you see through each section? How does the last section give us “tests” by which we can tell if we have “triumphed” over suffering, even if we are still grieving?**

- 2. Verses 1-2. What are the two basic ways David’s enemies were opposing him? (If you wish, read about Absalom’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-18.) How are the troubles you face similar to David’s?**

6. What have you learned in this psalm that can help you “pray your difficulties” better?

4. “The ultimate cause of spiritual dryness is God. Sometimes God allows us to experience dryness as a way to strengthen and grow us.” Do you agree with this statement? Could you share an example from your own life?

5. What have you learned in these psalms that can help you “pray your difficulties” better?

6. What have you learned in this psalm that can help you “pray your difficulties” better?

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 440.

Psalm

Sorrowing IV

Study 14 | Psalm 73

Psalm 73: THE PROBLEM OF INJUSTICE

- 1. Verses 4-12. What was the “all this” the psalmist saw that almost overthrew him?**
- 2. What spiritual condition resulted? (The psalmist describes it in verses 2, 16, 21.)**
- 3. Verses 3, 13-14. The first stage out of his anger and doubt is an honest view of his own motives and attitudes. What does he admit about the roots of his resentment in these verses?**

7. How does knowing about the work of Jesus Christ make it even easier for us (a) to understand the idea of a God who seems to sleep through the world's storm of injustice (v. 20), and (b) to know that God will never let us go or forsake us (vv. 23-24)?

8. Think back over the psalm. What have you learned that can help you "pray through your doubts and difficulties" better?

3. We have seen what David was petitioning for. What do we learn in the psalm about how we should petition God? (a) What attitudes or beliefs underlie his requests? (Think especially of what “uplifted hands” (v. 2) symbolize. Why is each attitude/belief important for petitioning? (b) The word for “anointed one” in Hebrew is “Messiah” and in Greek is “Christos.” How does David unwittingly point us to Christ here?
4. What seems to happen in verse 6? Has this ever happened to you? Should we expect this every time? Why or why not?

4. This psalm of petition does not end with an “answering touch” as in Psalm 28:6-9. (See also Psalms 6:8, 20:6). How can he nonetheless live in confidence that he will never be put to shame (v. 3)?

5. What did you learn in this psalm that you most need to apply to yourself?

3. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 2-3, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

4. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 4-5, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

5. How does David critique and counsel himself in verses 6-7, and how does this ensure that our petitions really unburden our hearts?

Psalm 5: MORNING PRAYER

Introduction

The evening prayer prepared our hearts for petition. Now the morning prayer is the place where petitions are made. Eugene Peterson says, "Psalm 5 prays our reentry into the waking world's daylight... Morning prayer prepares for action. Passivity, in which we let God work his will in us [as in the evening Psalm 4] is primary, but activity, in which we obey the will worked in us in the world, is also essential." ²

1. What do verses 1-3 teach us about the attitudes and methods we should have as we petition God? How does verse 2 give us the "warrant" to come to God with our petitions?

2. What do verses 4-10 tell us about how to petition God?

3. What do verses 11-12 tell us about how to frame our petitions?

- 4. Summarize what we have learned about how to bring our petitions to God. Which of these principles do you most need to put into practice?**

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989), pp. 61-63.

² Eugene H. Peterson, pp. 64-65.

Psalms

Adoration II

Study 19 | Psalm 63

Psalm 63: MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU

- 1. What signs of real spiritual experience can we read in verses 1-5?**
- 2. How, practically, does David find God as he contemplates in the sanctuary?**
- 3. What are some of the results of this meditation and adoration in David's life?**

4. Read this psalm from a Christ-centered perspective. How can we be even more certain than David (v. 12) that our spiritual thirst will not be permanent (v. 1)? Consider John 4:1-26 and John 19:28-29.

5. What in this psalm and Psalm 27 was most helpful to you personally? Why? What practical difference will this make in your life?

3. Verses 6-7b. After the rejoicing of the first five verses, a different note is struck. (a) Compare and contrast the calls of verses 1 and 6. Why the difference? (b) How do verses 6-7 follow naturally from verses 1-5?

4. Verses 7c-11. This passage of warning seems dissonant at first reading. (a) What does it tell us about how we are supposed to worship? (b) Assume that this is a third stage to an act of worship, after verses 1-5 (praise) and verses 6-7 (repentance). What is this stage? (c) What does the summons to “rest” have to do with worship and hearing God’s Word in faith? (Read Hebrews 4:1-13.)

Psalm 150: PRAISE THE LORD

1. Verse 1 tells us where the LORD is to be praised. What does it tell us?

2. Verse 2 tells why the LORD is to be praised. What does it tell us?

3. Verse 3-5 tells us how the LORD is to be praised. What do they tell us?

4. Verse 6 tells us who is to praise the LORD. What does it tell us?

5. We discussed why Psalm 1 was put at the beginning of the Psalter. Why is Psalm 150 put at the end?

6. Have some very difficult prayers of yours developed into praise?

7. What in these two psalms was most helpful to you personally? Why? What practical difference will this make in your life?

Psalms

Two ways to pray the Psalms

Appendix A

The Psalms have long been used in prayer by believers. Here are two ways you can join in.

Praying the Daily Office

This method is based on the *Book of Common Prayer*. It enables you to pray (selectively) through the book of Psalms every month, in morning and evening prayer times of fifteen to twenty minutes.

1. Read one or more psalms selected by the schedule. Read in the NIV.

2. Choose one or two verses to meditate on, using TACTS.

Teaching: About who God is and what he's done; about who we are and what we should do.

Adoration: How can I love and praise God on the basis of this? Pray the truth/text back to him.

Confession: How am I failing to realize this in my life? Confess the truth/text back to God.

Thanks: How is Christ the ultimate revelation of this truth and the ultimate answer to this sin of mine? Thank him that he is!

Supplication: How does this show me what I should or can be and do? Ask him for it.

"Colloquy": Speak to God about each element and imagine (biblically) his response to each one.

3. Pray the psalm to God (using the Coverdale or some similar version).

MONTHLY SCHEDULE

	<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>		<u>AM</u>	<u>PM</u>
1	1-4	6-8	8	38-40	41-43	15	75-77	78	22	107	108-109
2	9-11	12-13	9	44-46	47-49	16	79-81	82-85	23	110-113	114-115
3	15-17	18	10	50-52	53-55	17	86-88	89	24	116-118	119:1-32
4	19-21	22-23	11	56-58	59-61	18	90-92	93-94	25	119:33-72	119:73-104
5	24-26	27-29	12	62-64	65-67	19	95-97	98-101	26	119:105-144	119:145-176
6	30-31	32-34	13	68	69-70	20	102-103	104	27	120-125	126-131
7	35-36	37	14	71-72	73-74	21	105	106	28	132-135	136-138
									29	139-140	141-143
									30	144-146	147-150

Stream Prayer

This method enables you to meditate on a psalm and apply it to your life as you pray. (See Part I of the Introduction for an example of this method using Psalm 116.) It is fine to do one psalm at a time. However, if you would like to do more than one, the categories below allow you to choose from several types of psalms for a breadth of expression. Allow fifteen to twenty minutes if you do multiple psalms.

- 1. Choose a psalm and read it once for comprehension. If time permits, choose psalms from the Praise, Renewal and Commitment categories. Add a Teaching psalm between Renewal and Commitment if time allows.**
- 2. Pray the 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.
 - (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.
 - (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.
- 3. Move on to the next psalm and do the same thing.**

PSALM CATEGORIES

!	Praise	/+	Aspiration
?	Lament	T	Thanksgiving
∨	Penitential	W	Wisdom
>	Confidence	R	Royal

Note: The symbols in red can be used to indicate various types of psalms in your Bible or journal.

! PRAISE

Creation/glory/holiness 8, 19.5, 24, 65, 99, 104, 115, 145, 148

Grace/Redemption/mercy (see also "Thanks") 19.5, 98, 100, 111, 113, 114, 117, 122, 147, 149

Wisdom/Sovereignty over/justice 29, 47, 89.5, 96, 97, 139.5, 146

Worship itself 33, (67), 92, 95, 135, 150

RENEWAL

∨ Confession of sin 6, (25), 32, 38, 51, 79, 90, 106, 130, 143

? Lament (confession of need)

(Deserted by God) 13, 22, 39, 42-44, 60, 69, 73-74, 77, 79-80, 85, 88, 89.5, 137

(Despair) 39, 88

(Enemies) 3, 10, 12, 35, 54-55, 59, 64, 70, 83, 94, 102, 109, 120, 140, 142-43

(Justice cries) 58, 109, 137, 139.5

COMMITMENT

T Thanks 18, 30, 34, 40, 66, 75, 78, 103, 105, 107, 116, 124, 136, 138

/+ Aspiration/longing 5, 17, 27, 63, 67, 84, 86, 101, 108, (119), 123, 126, 131, 141

> Confidence (Personal) 4, 7, 9, 11, 16, 23, 25, 26, 28, 31, 41, 52, 56-57, 61-62, 71, 91, 118, 121, 129, 144

Confidence (Kingdom) 46, 48, 68, 76, 82, 87, 93, 94, 125, 132-134

TEACHING

R Royal/Messianic 2, 20, 21, (22), 45, 72, 110, (118)

W Wisdom 1, 14, 15, 36, 37, 49, 50, 53, 81, 112, 119, 127, 128



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