

June 25, 2017
The Psalms: Words to Pray With
Psalm 56

We have been talking a lot about prayer over the past few months. But how do we pray? What do we pray about? What is prayer like in real life?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor, was imprisoned by the Nazis for helping Jewish people and opposing the Third Reich. On May 15, 1943, he wrote these words from his cell in Tegel Prison: *"I am reading the Psalms daily, as I have done for years. I know them and love them more than any other book in the Bible."*

Another German (who would later become a great theologian), Jürgen Moltmann, fought with Hitler Youth. After the war, he was imprisoned by the Allies in Belgium, Scotland, and England. While in prison, Moltmann struggled with the devastation caused by the war in Britain and Germany, and the revelation of what the German nation had done to the Jewish people. He described it as a "dark night of the soul" as his world was shattered. He writes, *"A well-meaning army chaplain had given me a New Testament. I thought it was out of place. I would rather have had something to eat. But then I became fascinated by the Psalms (which were printed in an appendix) ... (they) gave me words for my own suffering. They opened my eyes to the God who is with those 'that are of broken heart.'"*

The psalms are prayers, spoken by people like you and I, to God. We look over the shoulder of people like David (a person described as a man after God's own heart) who wrestled to live out their faith in God, even in difficult circumstances. The psalms give us insights into how we can still love God through the highs – and the lows – of life.

Learning to Lament ... Telling the Truth to the One You Trust

When you go into a typical Christian bookstore, most books, plaques, and gift items speak to our well-being. They express praise and thanksgiving. Very few speak to our suffering, pain, or distress. But in the psalms, the majority take the form of laments (Eugene Peterson, one translator of the psalms, estimates 70%). They speak of hurt and suffering. They deal with life at its worst, not its best. This is one of the reasons I love the psalms. They are God's Word for my world ... a world where life is often messy, frequently disappointing, and frequently painful.

"Lamenting" is not whining or complaining. Whining is just a way of feeling sorry for ourselves. Lamenting is being honest with God about our pain, **and** seeking God's wisdom to deal with it. We lament things we believe are wrong or unjust, which we know ought to be changed. We cry out that God's will is not being done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Evil is appearing to triumph. We want to know how we can maintain and live our faith in God when injustice appears to be taking the day. We seek God's presence in the midst of it.

We all need someone we can trust. We need someone we can talk to who won't judge us. We need someone who won't run away when we hurt. We need a safe place to be honest. When life is a mess, who do you talk to? When your job is driving you crazy, who do you speak with? When your relationships are hurting, who will listen? When you are physically in constant pain, who can you express that to? David shows us that God is that person who we can come to – whatever, whenever, wherever, however we are. God can handle our laments as well as our praise.

The Life of a Lamenter ... Finding God in Strange Places

"Be merciful to me, O God ..." David cries out. David's life is in danger. Evil appears to be winning. But at the end of the day, David credits God with rescuing him from death and keeping his feet from slipping. It appears that God had miraculously intervened in David's life and delivered him from some dire situation. Had some great miracle occurred?

Notice what happened. The introductory note to Psalm 56 reads: *"A psalm of David regarding the time the Philistines seized him in Gath."* If you turn to 1 Samuel 21, this story is told in full. David was running for his life from Saul. He took the sword of the slain Philistine giant, Goliath, and sought refuge among the Philistines in Goliath's own home town, Gath. Is this a smart move? Definitely not. *"(King) Achish's officials weren't happy about his being there ..."* (1 Samuel 21:11). Understatement.

"David heard these comments and was afraid of what King Achish might do to him. So he pretended to be insane, scratching on doors and drooling down his beard. Finally King Achish said to his men, 'Must you bring me a madman?'" (1 Samuel 21:12-14). David has made a dumb decision. Now he is flailing around like a madman in a desperate attempt to save his skin. As far as I can tell, there is no miracle. There is only a terrified man with just enough presence of mind to grasp at a straw. Perhaps David did cry out, in his desperation, for God's help. Perhaps God did give David the idea of pretending he was crazy. And perhaps God did move Achish to have mercy and let David go. We don't see that clearly told to us in 1 Samuel. There is no record of God's intervention.

But David saw God at work. He gives God credit for his deliverance. He believed God softened Achish's heart to let him go. There was no earthquake or thunder from heaven. There was not even a still, small voice from the Lord. But in an unusual place, the simple fact that David survived, showed him the hand of God, powerfully at work in his life.

The Legacy of Lament ... God is the Core of our Being

If you read the psalms attributed to David and then try to envision his life, they don't seem to coincide. From the psalms, you might imagine a pious, other-worldly hermit, or a timid neurotic – hardly the king we read about in the rest of Scripture. How can we account for this incredible disparity between what David actually experienced and how he felt? What can explain the differences between his outward and inward journeys?

We all experience outward and inward lives simultaneously. For instance, I was recently at Board Meetings at Carey Theological College. Outwardly, the facts are I met a with bright people, asked some questions, and expressed my thoughts. Inwardly, I wonder what are people thinking? Did I say anything wrong? Did I say anything right? Did I come across like a fool? My memories are not the facts (outward stuff) but my feelings (inward stuff).

The outward facts of David's life are certainly impressive – killing lions bare-handed, slaying giants, escaping King Saul, slaughtering Philistines. The inward experiences of David's life, revealed in the psalms, are fascinating. He does not ask, "Do people like me?" "Did I make a good impression?" (perhaps if he had he asked such questions before going to Gath, carrying Goliath's sword, he might have been better off). Inwardly, David focused on God, and his relationship with God. God was involved in all the details of his life – both the good and the bad. Both the obvious times – like when Samuel anointed him king and when he killed Goliath – and the not-so-obvious times, like when he made it out of Gath alive, with spittle dripping from his beard. David could see God's hand at work and active in his life all the time, in every way. How was David able to maintain that perspective?

1. We are God's beloved. In Psalm 18, a long summary of David's military career, written after he was established as king, he writes, "... He (God) rescued me because He delights in me" (Psalm 18:19). When you read the stories of 1 & 2 Samuel – assassination attempts, chases, years spent dirty, homeless, and hungry, all night battles, etc., etc. – you are surprised to hear David express his confidence in God's love so strongly. David had had every right to question God's goodness – even His existence.

We often equate our value to God with blessings from God. If God loves us, He should provide for us – well. We should be healthy. We should have a happy life. Things should go smoothly. If we have enough faith, we should see dramatic blessings and miracles. Yet consider David, the man after God's own heart. Most of the time he saw nothing dramatic from God. His life was hard. He was continually disappointed. But he never grew disillusioned with God. He never gave up on God.

Who are the real people of faith? The people who need the miracles? Or the people who trust in God despite not seeing miracles? Many people believed in Jesus as long as he performed miracles, but fell away as soon as the miracles ended; the same people who praised God for the miracles go on to yell, "Crucify Him" (Luke 19:37). Jesus chides Thomas for needing a miracle and praises those who believe without miracles (John 20:29). David models for us a genuine, stubborn, patient, persevering faith, even when there is no miracle. God is at work in the non-dramatic everyday experiences of life.

2. The spiritual world of God's care is just as real as the physical world of swords and spears. David's psalms show us the inward life of a person consciously trying to make God a part of every aspect of his life. We are sometimes tempted to dichotomize our lives into the "sacred" part (Sunday mornings) and the "secular" part (everything else). Our faith is a personal issue, which we ought to keep to ourselves. But David couldn't live

that way. His relationship with God coloured everything He did. His faith in God was integrated into everything.

Alexander Carmichael, editor of a 19th century anthology of old Gaelic hymns and spiritual poems, wrote of the Scots Highlanders, *"Religion ... permeated everything – (the sacred and secular) blended and shaded into one another like the iridescent colours of the rainbow. The people were sympathetic and synthetic, unable to see and careless to know where the secular began and the religious ended – an admirable union of elements in life ..."* Reading the Gaelic poems and hymns, like reading the psalms, describes an experience where God was a part of everything – from birth to death, from lighting the fire to tending the cattle, from walking to market to going to church. It's a wonderful, holistic approach to life where faith in God is an integral, integrated core of our existence.

Philip Yancey writes, *"That process of 'letting God in' on every detail of life is one I need to learn from. In the busy, industrialized modern world, we tend to compartmentalize our lives. We fill our days with activities – getting the car repaired, taking vacations, going to work, mowing the lawn, chauffeuring the kids – and then try to carve out some time for 'spiritual' activities such as church, small groups, personal devotions. I see none of that separation in the psalms. Somehow David and the other poets managed to make God the gravitational center of their lives so that everything related to God. To them, worship was the central activity in life, not something to get over in order to resume other activity. As C.S. Lewis has said, being a practicing Christian 'means that every single act and feeling, every experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, must be referred to God.'"*

Summer is a good time to work on that constant process of reorientation. The psalms can help us know God as gravitational centre of our lives, the integrated core of our being. We can "pray the psalms," making their prayers our prayers (Jesus and the New Testament writers did this – they quote the Psalms more than any other book of the Old Testament).

Yancey goes on to comment, *"I am sure that making the psalms my own prayers will require a lifelong commitment. I sense in them an urgency, a desire and hunger for God that makes my own look anemic by contrast. The psalmists panted for God with their tongues hanging out, as an exhausted deer pants for water. They lay awake at night dreaming of 'the fair beauty of the Lord.' They would rather spend one day in God's presence than a thousand years elsewhere. It was the advanced school of faith these poets were enrolled in, and often I feel more like a kindergartner. Now that I've started to read the Psalms again, maybe some of it will rub off"* (p. 132).

This summer, take a fresh look at the Psalms, they give us words to sing, pray, and live as we go through the highs and lows, the celebrations and the sorrows of life ...