

WEEK 5: The Psalms

The origin of the word “psalm” finds its root meaning in a Hebrew word that refers to a very specific type of song – one that is accompanied by a stringed instrument. No surprise that there are over 140 hymns in the Christian Hymnals where the lyrics are adapted from the Book of Psalms. Some of the most recognized passages from the Bible come from Psalms and if you were to let your Bible fall naturally open, nine times out of ten it would probably open to Psalms making it the second easiest book to find after Genesis.

Even though they are familiar, you don’t hear many sermons or Sunday School lessons taught about the Psalms, except the occasional mention of Psalm 23, especially when it was something you probably memorized in 4th or 5th grade. For the most part, the Psalms are relegated to the role of supporting actor. We sing them or even pray them, but we don’t preach them.

This week we are going to explore some of the texts from different types of Psalms. While there are multiple ways of classifying and subcategorizing them, they really boil down to three different types: psalms of praise, psalms of despair (called laments) and psalms of thanksgiving.

Most of us link authorship of the Book of Psalms to King David; however, scholars believe of the 150 in the book, only about 40 or so were written by David. He gets most of the credit because we associated them with music he played for an angry King Saul when just a boy in his court or because of the singing and leaping and dancing for joy David did when the ark was brought to the tabernacle in Jerusalem. Whether you feel like leaping for joy, or crying, or yelling out in anger, there is a psalm that speaks to that emotion.

Listed below are the Psalms that we will talk about this week if you want to get a head start.

Monday

Psalms 51
Psalms 3

Tuesday

Psalms 88

Wednesday

Psalms 138

Thursday

Psalms 121

Friday

Psalms 23

Monday

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1)

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. (Psalms 3:3-5)

I will admit that I have trouble reading the Book of Psalms. When I go to the wisdom literature section of the Old Testament, of which Psalms is a part, I gravitate more toward the Book of Proverbs. In Proverbs I find little gems that speak to practical day-to-day living. Psalms is basically a collection of prayers and songs, full of a gamut of emotions. When I study or look for a teaching moment in the scriptures, very rarely do I open the Book of Psalms. I never really saw them being a valid source of practical application in my life.

Many Christians, including myself, find prayer to be a difficult spiritual discipline to practice. Often, we are unsure of how or what to pray even if it is not in front of everyone in the Youth House! Thankfully, God has given us the Psalms to guide our practice of prayer. In the Psalms, we get a model of how to be thankful. We also see ways in which we may wrestle with God in prayer when it seems that the world is against us. Many of the Psalms, such as the ones chosen for today, help us when we feel we have done something that requires forgiveness, or we need God to show us the way back on to the right path.

This last winter I taught an Intro to the Old Testament course as part of Adult Education and the outline we used suggested opening each session with a prayer from the Book of Psalms. After eight weeks of that, I realized it's practical importance. The Book of Psalms provides a series of templates for every type of issue and feeling we can take to God, and to neglect the Psalms is to neglect prayer as being integral to our practical lives. It is as if you are living with your most favorite author, perhaps J.K. Rowling, Jodi Picoult, Harper Lee, or in my case, John Irving, and you never take the time to talk to them – all you do is read their books. . .

Peace (Shalom)

Tuesday

*Sometimes I just feel like quittin, I still might.
Why do I put up this fight, why do I still write?
Sometimes it's hard enough just dealin' with real life.
The pressure's too much man,
I just tryin' to do what's best....
And I try,
sit alone and I cry.
Yo, I won't tell no lie,
not a moment goes by
that I don't pray to the sky,
please I'm beggin' you God*

(8 Mile, Eminem)

*O LORD, the God who saves me, day and
night I cry out before you. May my prayer
come before you; turn your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws
near the grave. I am counted among those
who go down to the pit; I am like a man with-
out strength.
I am set apart with the dead, like the slain
who lie in the grave, whom you remember no
more, who are cut off from your care.*

(Psalms 88:1-5)

For those of you who remember 7th grade Sunday School, you might recall our lesson on the Psalms. I find a great deal of similarity in today's rap music and the psalms of the Hebrew Bible. Not only are the poetic devices including constant alternating meter and rhythm similar; there is a level of deep emotion in the psalms that I see embodied in artists such as Eminem and Kendrick Lamar.

In today's Psalm (and parallel example of rap) we find one who is overwhelmed with sorrow and grief. In ancient times they were called laments and almost a third of the psalms fall into this category. The author's life is in shambles and he is filled with utter hopelessness. Yet, in the midst of this, he turns to God and cries out. The psalmist says, "day and night," he cries out to his Lord. Not a moment goes by when he is not turning to God lamenting his despair.

There is nothing wrong with being honest with God. In fact, there are several psalms where the raw emotion is so great, we find them hard to read and we wonder how they can be in the Bible. Individuals are so angry that they want to bash in the teeth of their enemies (58:7-9) and are full of revengeful hate that they pray the infant children of their enemies will be killed in acts of revenge (138:8-9)! What do we do with these psalms? How can we find anything redeeming or uplifting in them?

When it seems that everything has gone wrong and the entire world has fallen in on us, we can still find peace in the assurance that God loves us and will be with us. He is our light in the midst of the darkest night. That all being said, there are sometimes when it is hard for us to hold on to that truth. God does not seem to be near; you cannot see the light even as much as you squint. I believe these psalms are part of the sacred writings to show us that all aspects of human emotion, from praise and thanksgiving to utter despair and anger, are safe with God. More importantly, we are not alone in feeling them, and even in seasons when God seems to be nowhere in sight, She is still there.

Peace (Shalom)

Wednesday

*I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down towards your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness*
Psalms 138:1-2

“It is right for us to give Him thanks and praise.”

Does that phrase sound familiar, but you can't quite place it? I'll give you a hint: it involves breaking bread and a cup. Yes, those are words that are part of the Litany of the Lord's Supper. Every time we take communion, one of the things we say as a community is that it is right for us to thank God! Today, we focus on the other major category of psalms, those of thanksgiving and praise.

The psalmist is giving the basic reasons why all people, not just believers, should give thanks and praise to God. Each person has a responsibility to praise God, for all are creatures of His hands, and though you don't have to be religious to be grateful, there is something about belief in God as creator of the universe, shaper of history, and author of the laws of life that gives purpose to our gratitude.

Still, we take that for granted. Everything we have and all that we are is because of God but we tend to look at our accomplishments as something we alone have achieved. The best example of falling into that trap was the people of Israel as they wandered through the wilderness during the time of the Exile. All they did was complain, and Moses was very worried that they would forget to be thankful as they entered the Promised Land. Because of that, most every Jewish prayer starts with a blessing to God, the creator of the universe, and the first words of the morning blessing are “I thank you.”

It is no coincidence that when a bunch of Puritans (Calvinists steeped in the Hebrew Bible) came to America they instituted a day known as Thanksgiving, recognizing the presence of God in American history. Moreover, on the third of October 1863, at the height of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued a Thanksgiving proclamation, thanking God that though the nation was at war with itself, there were still blessings for which both sides could express gratitude:

“No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy ... I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble

penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.”

Peace (Shalom)

Thursday

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.*

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

Psalms 121:1-4

As we have seen, there are psalms that cry out with raw emotion, there are ones that speak to the joys of praise and thanksgiving, and then there are those which give us comfort and guidance. Today's psalm is from a section of the Book of Psalms referred to as the songs of ascent, or the pilgrimage songs. They were meant to be sung as someone makes their pilgrimage to Jerusalem during special festivals. They were short and had a fairly consistent meter to them making them easy to sing while walking a pilgrim's journey.

Psalms 121 is my favorite of this section because of the imagery that it invokes, but also because it is a song of the ordinary, the plain, and the calm. There is no big outpouring of human emotion, no crying or weeping, and no singing or dancing. It is just comforting as an everyday reminder of who God is.

Doesn't it always seem true that we see God when we look to the high places? Think of when we are on mountain tops, whether they be a physical place such as Mt. Mitchell or Greybeard at Montreat or a person that you look up to for advice. Saint Augustine made the point that hills reflect the image and impact of light – they do not radiate from within. Saints in the church are like those hills to which we look in order to see the reflective light of God. I know there are several folks in my life in whom I can see the reflection of God.

The psalm goes on to refer to God as our “keeper” (verses 5-8). That word is used 6 times in this short chapter and comes from the Hebrew word that meant guardian or watchman. As defined in Exodus 22, this guardian takes an oath and was never allowed to use that which he guarded for personal gain. Here the imagery is again very strong of God watching out for us, ever protecting us. The psalm’s author goes on to say that our God does not slumber or sleep. It was common belief in ancient times that gods slept. In fact, when Elijah mocks the prophets of Ba’al in 1 Kings 18, he suggests that maybe their god was asleep, and they need to just yell a little louder. Our God does not sleep, nor does she even fall into slumber; a concept that referred to drowsiness or inattentiveness. These verses always bring to my mind the scene you often see in every thriller when it is time to sleep and someone must stand watch. What we see here is the watchman who tells us to rest comfortably, for He will not fall asleep and leave you in peril. With Him you are totally safe!

Peace (Shalom)

Friday

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley;
I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Psalms 23*

We could not cover a week about Psalms and not look at the quintessential 23rd Psalm. As I said in the introduction to this week’s study, you may have committed this psalm to memory either as an assignment in Sunday School, theology class at school, or because it is widely used in the lyrics of songs in popular culture. The unfortunate thing is, because it is so familiar, we often read right over the words without noticing what they are truly saying.

Why did this specific psalm reach “rock star” status? It is part of weekly Shabbat prayers in the Jewish faith and recited as part of funeral blessings, but there are other psalms that are just as much a part of Jewish faith and ritual. Some have suggested it is because it has all the right ingredients. It is short, only six verses. It is lyrical, therefore, easy to say and memorize. The imagery is very vivid – green pastures, still waters, dark valleys. Finally, it is comforting and uses the analogy of the Lord as a shepherd – one that is familiar to both Jews and Christians.

What I think is fascinating about this psalm is the transition in metaphor. Like I said, you may be so familiar with the text that you missed it. In the opening verses, we are sheep and the Lord is a shepherd. Suddenly we are sitting at a table. We are drinking from a cup. What happened to being a sheep? Since when do sheep sit at tables and drink from cups? Obviously, the words that are chosen teach us a deeper lesson. At times we are as fully dependent and as clueless as sheep. We wander. We seek comfort. Our goals are not much beyond food and a comfortable place to lay down or drink. Sheep don't pull anything or plow anything like oxen. They basically need to be led.

There is a higher, more meaningful relationship to Him. We are no longer sheep. We are human beings created in His image. We are aware. We face our enemies (physical, mental, emotional) and defeat them with the help of the strength and confidence that God provides for us. God sets the table. She fills the cup. She gives us anointing, strength, and confidence so that what seemed at first to be way too scary settles down into a life of full relationship with Her. Thanks be to God!

Peace (Shalom)