

USING THE PSALMS (2)

Praying the Psalms

A. Introduction

1. No other book of the Bible has had a richer history in the life of the church than the book of Psalms.

The Lord Jesus we know sang the Psalms, prayed the Psalms, quoted the Psalms and said that the Psalms are about Him.

The first followers of Jesus, as Jews, would have prayed and sung the Psalms and known them by heart.

For majority of the history of the church, the Psalms have been read, preached, sung, memorised, and prayed by God's people.

Yet that is not true today.

Apart from a few famous Psalms and a few famous verses from the Psalms, we no longer use or are as familiar with them, as Christ's followers once were.

One reason for this, is that we don't know how to use them or to use them well.

2. My purpose for this series is to help us to use this book again.

By reading the Psalms.

By praying the Psalms.

By singing the Psalms.

By living the Psalms.

3. We've looked at how we read the Psalms.

We read it as a book.

A book written to give hope to the people of God after the exile was over that the Christ was coming, and to teach them how to live faithfully as they waited.

We read it as a book that describes the Christ.

The Christ, the people of Israel, were waiting for, who has come in the person of Jesus, is described in each individual psalm, each of the five books within the Psalms, and in the book of Psalms as a whole.

We read it as a book that describes the Christian.

Those who take refuge in the Christ have been united to Him by faith, so His life becomes our life. The blessings that come to the Christ come to us. The kind of life He experienced is the kind of life we will experience.

4. The Psalms as well being read by God's people are to be prayed by God's people.

The book of Psalms, continued to be prayer book of God's people, after the Christ they were waiting for had come, suffered and then entered his glory.

The Early Church prayed the Psalms.

"On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our

father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his anointed One." Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed." (Acts 4:23-27)

This practice (of praying the Psalms) was continued by the Imperial Church.

Athanasius in a letter to Marcellinus made this clear when he wrote:

"Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill... it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed... The Psalms not only exhort us to be thankful, they also provide us with fitting words to say... again the Psalms supply words with which both those who flee persecution and those who suffer under it may suitably address themselves to God, and it does the same for those who have been rescued from it. In fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn."

During the period of the Medieval Church, before the age of the the printing press, the only part of the Bible, which a person was likely to own was a copy of the Psalms.

Praying the Psalms was also important to the church at the time of the Reformation. The prayer book of the Church of England divides the Psalms up so that every psalm is prayed once a month.

"The Psalms: they are designed to be prayed." (Gordon Wenham)

B. Why should we pray the Psalms?

1. It's how Jesus prayed.

Jesus, as a Jew, would have grown up praying the Psalms, privately, and in the synagogue Sabbath by Sabbath.

Some have suggested that as He hung on the cross, Jesus was praying through the Psalms.

This would have been an appropriate thing to do, for the early psalms of Book 1, are the prayers of a righteous man who was suffering and in response cries out to God for help.

We know that Jesus was praying Psalm 22 in the final moments of His life.

"From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" – which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46)

"My God, my God, what have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1)

"When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30)

"For he has done it." (Psalm 22:31)

Jesus, the blessed man of Psalm 1, who had meditated on the law of the LORD day and night, recalled those words in the most extreme moment of His life, as He dies in the place of sinners, and applied them to His specific situation.

When we pray the Psalms we are being like Christ. We do what Christ did.

But not only did, but does, as He continues to lead us in praying the Psalms.

2. It's how Jesus teaches us to pray.

"For thirty centuries, God's people have found in the Psalms an answer to the disciples' plea: "Lord, teach us to pray." (Ken Langley)

We need Jesus to teach us how to pray.

As the one human being who has prayed perfectly, He is the best person to do so.

One of the main ways in which Jesus teaches us to pray is through the Psalms, because the Psalms are ultimately His own prayers.

We have 150 prayers of Jesus to learn from.

Through the Psalms Jesus teaches us about the different tones/emotions of our prayers (different types of prayers we can pray – praise, thanks, confession, lament, expressing trust etc).

Through the Psalms Jesus teaches us about the different subjects for our prayers (a wide variety of different topics are found within the Psalms).

Through the Psalms Jesus teaches us about the different words to use in our prayers (He give us language to use when we pray).

But most of all, through the Psalms Jesus teaches us how to pray according to God's Will. These prayers are inspired prayers.

C. How could we pray the Psalms?

1. Verbatim.

Praying the words as we find them in each individual psalm.

2. Responsive.

Letting the words of each individual psalm shape our prayers.

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What does this look like practically?

a) You read through the psalm verse by verse.

b) After each verse or line of each verse, you pray in response to that verse or line, letting what it says prompt you to rejoice, repent or request.

c) Once you have run out of things to pray for that verse or line, you move onto the next line and repeat, and keep going until you run out of time. It doesn't matter if you don't finish praying the psalm.

If other thoughts come to mind that don't directly come from the verse you've read, that's okay, pray about it (Philippians 4:6 tells us to pray about "everything").

If nothing comes to mind to do with the verse you've just read, move onto the next one.

If you have a list of things to pray for, think about how that verse might be prayed for the items on your prayer list.

3. When we pray the Psalms we will find ourselves meditating on the law of the LORD.

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalm 1:2)

As we pray the Psalms we read the law of the LORD (i.e. the whole book of Psalms).

As we pray the Psalms we fix our mind on the law of the LORD as we think about how to pray in response to what we've just read (what to rejoice, what to repent, what to request).

As we pray the Psalms we are shaped by the law of the LORD.

D. What happens when we pray the Psalms?

1. We learn how to pray.

Here is a simple way to teach someone how to pray.

Anyone can do this.

2. We learn how to pray other parts of Scripture.

We can use the 'responsive' method on every book of the Bible.

3. We pray God's Will.

When we pray the Psalms our focus is not on what we want to pray about but what God wants us to pray about – He sets the agenda.

4. We pray about things we might not normally pray about.

5. We pray for "the same old things" but not in "the same old way", to quote Don Whitney.

Praying about the same people and the same situations is a good thing to do.

By praying the Psalms, we can still pray about the same people and the same situations, but we find we will do so in new and different ways.

6. We find ourselves in a conversation where God speaks, then we speak, then God speaks, and so on.

E. Praying a Psalm

1. Have a go at praying Psalm 23:

*The LORD is my shepherd.
I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will 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 love will follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

2. Use the psalm we pray together on Sunday during our morning service to direct your prayers each day for the rest of the week.