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Praying the Psalms

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

[T]he Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.

—Martin Luther¹

For some years now, whenever I teach a class on the book of Psalms, I give my students two options for a final writing project. They can write an exegetical paper on a psalm of their choosing—a traditional academic assignment—or they can keep a Psalms prayer journal. The latter project consists of praying a psalm for fifteen minutes a day, at least four days a week, for the duration of the six-week course. Each day, after praying through a psalm, the student writes in a journal about whatever the psalm evoked in him or her.²

The prayer journal is inevitably the option chosen by the majority of students, recognizing their need to grow in a life of prayer. Such discipline, they soon find, is not easy: “This Psalms prayer journal was much more difficult than I had imagined. When I heard about the assignment I thought it was just a slam dunk.

¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter* (1545), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 256.

²I borrowed this practice from Eugene Peterson, who describes it in his wonderful book *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

The Psalms teach us how to pray. When we pray the Psalms, we follow in the footsteps of a long line of Christians and Jews who have used the Psalter as a guide to prayer. We learn from those saints to bring all of ourselves to God in prayer: our sorrows, our laments, and our anger as well as our joys and praise.

Nothing to it. I was wrong. I think writing the paper would've been easier, but this exercise was much more valuable.”³

Despite the demanding nature of this exercise, or probably because of it, the Psalms prayer journal has proven to be fruitful for many of my students. They express appreciation for the chance to practice a discipline of prayer, something that (ironically) often takes a backseat to the many tasks and demands of a seminary student's life. As one student wrote, “The hardest part of the whole exercise was trying to set aside the time every day to do the prayer and reflection. As Christian leaders it's imperative that we make prayer part of our daily routine, yet... we get so darn busy that the main thing doesn't always occupy the main place in our lives.”

“Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest”—such a practice of meditation on scripture requires patience, and it is a distinctly countercultural exercise in our world of nonstop information and entertainment

Those students who choose this exercise are following in the footsteps of countless believers, Christians and Jews alike, who have used the psalms as guides into a life of prayer. The earliest interpreters of the psalms, in fact—the anonymous editors of the Psalter—placed at the very beginning of the book an invitation into such a life:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers. (Ps 1:1–3 NIV)

There are two paths one may take, the psalmist says. The first is the one of least resistance. Surely it won't hurt to spend some time with the wicked. They are, after all, witty, sophisticated, attractive people. But it is all too easy to move from walking with them to standing in their company to finally sitting at their table, fully enmeshed in their schemes.

The harder path, the one that requires discipline and persistence, is the path of prayer and meditation on God's teaching (*torah* in the Hebrew). The one who chooses this path delights in the *torah* of the LORD, and meditates on it day and night. The same Hebrew word translated here as “meditates” (*hagah*) is used in Isa 31:4 to describe a lion growling over its prey. Just so, the one who meditates on

³This quotation and the ones that follow from my former students are gleaned from anonymous feedback that I solicited at the end of each Psalms class.

God's word savors it, chewing it until it yields that which is life-giving. This is meditation as mastication.⁴

A well-known collect from the *Book of Common Prayer* takes up this same image of meditation as eating:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.⁵

“Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest”—such a practice of meditation on scripture requires patience, and it is a distinctly countercultural exercise in our world of nonstop information and entertainment. When one's instinct is to reach for the smartphone the moment there is the slightest hint of boredom or silence (at the bus stop, in the coffee shop line), the art of patiently waiting is a difficult one to practice, indeed. But for the sake of our souls, it is a habit we desperately need to cultivate. One of my students put it well:

Praying the Psalms has made me more patient. Well, at least a little. I know not to expect to know what a psalm is saying the first time through or the last time through either, but I have learned to trust that it will open up as I pray. So that it is not “just” a psalm “about war” or in today's psalm, “about a great city,” but rather about something God is doing, something that the psalmist sees God doing.

That last phrase is particularly telling. The psalmists are people so steeped in scripture and so disciplined in prayer that they are able to see what God is doing in the everyday happenstances of life. It requires a certain kind of vision to see God at work not just in the joyful moments, but also in the often mundane and sometimes heartbreaking circumstances of life. We cultivate that sort of vision, that sort of seeing, when we pray the Psalms.

PRAYING WITH THE SAINTS

The Psalms help cultivate in us the vision to see God's activity in the world, because they record the witness of countless generations of believers who have prayed before us, believers who waited and watched for God's activity. Luther writes, “[The Psalter] relates not only the works of the saints, but also their words, how they spoke with God and prayed, and still speak and pray.... [It] pictures for us real, living, active saints.”⁶

Those “real, living, active saints” were bold in prayer. Indeed, sometimes their prayers strike us as presumptuous: “You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent!

⁴I'm adapting a phrase from Peterson's book *Answering God*, 26.

⁵*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 184.

⁶Luther, *Preface to the Psalter*, 254.

O Lord, do not be far from me! Wake up! Bestir yourself for my defense, for my cause, my God and my Lord!” (Ps 35:22–23).

“Wake up!” The psalmist is in trouble and does not see God’s salvation “on the ground.” So she is bold to pray, trusting that God will hear and act. It is not a prayer one often (or ever) hears in church, but it is an honest prayer, one that struggles to reconcile faith in God with the reality of present pain. Rather than giving up on God, the psalmist calls on God to act. This is the power of lament—holding God to God’s promises. Jon Levenson, in his description of Ps 74, summarizes well the theology of lament:

[T]he author or redactor of Psalm 74 acknowledges the reality of militant, triumphant, and persistent evil, but he steadfastly and resolutely refuses to accept this reality as final and absolute. Instead he challenges YHWH to act like the hero of old, to conform to his magisterial nature.⁷

In short, the authors of the lament psalms “call upon God to close the gap between his reputation and his current behavior.”⁸

No quietists, these psalmists, they are bold to draw God’s attention to all that is wrong in the world and in their lives, and they are bold to call on God to fulfill God’s promises of life and salvation. They are the widows in Jesus’ parable of the unjust judge, praying with *chutzpah* and with unflagging determination (Luke 18:1–8). When we pray with the psalms, we are schooled in the boldness of these saints.

*We sin, and we are sinned against. We get hurt and angry.
The cursing psalms give us the words to bring that hurt,
that hate, and that anger before God.*

PRAYING IN THE PRESENCE OF ENEMIES

The world of the psalms is filled with danger, though the danger is not often specified. Disease, war, famine, betrayal—all these are referred to with metaphors like “Sheol” or “the pit” or “the grave.” And then there are the enemies, the psalmist’s foes who plot his downfall, or his former friends who betray him. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,” prays the composer of the church’s most beloved psalm (23:5), and we would like to think that this is a scene of reconciliation, enemies breaking bread together. But if the other psalms are any guide, the psalmist is simply acknowledging that the enemy is always present, even as she herself experiences the Lord’s blessing.

References to enemies are ubiquitous in the Psalter,⁹ particularly in the lament psalms, and modern readers are understandably scandalized by some of the

⁷Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 19.

⁸Ibid., 24.

⁹See, for example, Pss 17; 30; 58; 69; 109. The examples are too numerous to list. According to Eugene Peterson, God is the “primary subject” of the Psalms, but the enemies are “in solid second place” (*Answering God*, 95).

prayers prayed there against them: “He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones” (Ps 109:18).¹⁰

How do we pray these psalms, the ones that ask God to destroy the enemy? Some, of course, would argue that we shouldn’t pray them at all (which is the *de facto* use of them in the church’s worship). Others would claim that such psalms acknowledge the reality of evil and therefore cannot be ignored.¹¹ One thing these psalms certainly do is give us permission to bring our whole selves—the good, the bad, and the ugly—before God in prayer. We sin, and we are sinned against. We get hurt and angry. The cursing psalms give us the words to bring that hurt, that hate, and that anger before God. One of my students put it well:

I thought this exercise would be about scoring “points,” becoming more spiritual somehow, spending time in Scripture and prayer. But it’s not. It’s about being myself—bringing all of me to God and inviting God to be a part of my problems, my hurt, my healing, and my joy.

I am reminded of a friend of mine, a pastor in his first parish who had to deal with a particularly difficult matriarch of the congregation. This woman had run the small parish for years and she did not take kindly to the new young pastor. She reprimanded him harshly at church council meetings, talked about him behind his back, sought to sabotage whatever new program he tried to start. He went to her several times to try to reconcile with her. He took to heart Jesus’ words and prayed for her (Matt 5:44). But she continued to make his life very difficult. Finally, one day as he was driving home from a weekly study group with other pastors, mulling over the situation, a song came to him and he started to sing the following (to the tune of “Bind Us Together, Lord”):

Bind her and gag her, Lord. Bind her and gag her with cords that cannot
be broken.
Bind her and gag her, Lord. Bind her and gag her, Lord. Bind her and gag
her with love.
There is only one God. There is only one Lord.
And her name’s not Roseanne.¹² That is why I implore:
Bind her and gag her, Lord. Bind her and gag her with cords that cannot
be broken.

It was a cathartic moment for that young pastor. He eventually went back to praying for her, but in that moment, he needed to pray *out* his frustration and anger. The psalmists would have understood.

¹⁰The psalmist here is quoting his enemies but he asks soon after for the same curse to be upon them (109:20). The most infamous of the cursing psalms is, of course, Ps 137.

¹¹There are many helpful writings that deal with the problem of the cursing psalms. Eugene Peterson’s chapter on “Enemies” is particularly insightful (*Answering God*, 95–103), as is Ellen Davis’s essay, “But Surely Not Those! The Cursing Psalms,” in *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA.: Cowley, 2001) 23–29. For two other fine and somewhat contrasting views on the cursing psalms, see the chapters by Nancy L. de Claissé-Walford and Joel M. LeMon in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 77–109.

¹²Name has been changed.

Our final word on this matter as Christians is, of course, Jesus' command: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44). There may be times in the life of faith, however, when the cursing psalms are a necessary step towards praying for our enemies. For in prayer we are bringing not only our hurts and hatreds but also our enemies themselves into the presence of God. Whether God acts according to our wishes or not is up to God. In prayer, we leave our hurts, our hatreds, and our enemies with God, and we trust that God will do with them, and with us, whatever God wills.

PRAYING GOD'S PRAISE

Lament (and its corresponding preoccupation with the enemy) is one of the most common forms of prayer in the Psalter, but it is not the only prayer of the psalmists. The Hebrew name of the Psalter is *Tehillim* ("Praises"). The psalmists are as quick to praise God as they are to lament. Indeed, as scholars have long noted, most of the laments end in praise. The composer of Ps 30, for example, moves from remembered lament to praise in just a few short verses:

To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication:
"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?
Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!"
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever. (Ps 30:8–12)

It is important to note that the praise of the psalmists neither negates nor apologizes for the lament that precedes it. The praise instead grows out of the lament, as the psalmist—who is bold to pray for God to fulfill God's promises—is also eager to proclaim God's faithfulness when those promises are fulfilled (and sometimes even before they are fulfilled). The one who prays boldly also watches and waits eagerly for God's salvation.

Note that praise is not flattery. Praise speaks the truth about God, even if that truth is not immediately evident in the life of the psalmist. The composer of Ps 22, for instance, does an about-face in the middle of the psalm for no apparent reason. He voices anguished lament in verse after verse: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?...O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.... You [God] lay me in the dust of death" (Ps 22:1, 2, 15). Finally, in the midst of another cry, something changes; not, apparently, in the psalmist's outward circumstances, but in his realization that God has heard: "Save me from the mouth of the lion and from the horns of the wild oxen—You have answered me!" (Ps 22:21).¹³

¹³Author's translation. For a beautiful sermon on Ps 22 that highlights this sudden reversal, see Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 152–157.

The change is that abrupt, so abrupt that English translations try to soften it: “Save me from the mouth of the lion! From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me” (NRSV). “Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen” (NIV). But the last verb is clear: You have answered me. The psalmist may still be surrounded by enemies, pinned on the horns of wild oxen, but suddenly he knows, somehow he knows, that God has answered, and that realization makes all the difference. The rest of the psalm is as full of praise as the first half is full of lament. The psalmist witnesses to God’s salvation and calls on his community to praise God, so that future generations, those “yet unborn” might know that “he has done it” (Ps 22:31).

praise is rooted in the long experience of the believing community—their remembrance of God’s faithfulness in the past, their experience of God’s salvation in the present, and their expectation of what God will do in God’s promised future

This kind of praise is rooted in the long experience of the believing community—their remembrance of God’s faithfulness in the past, their experience of God’s salvation in the present, and their expectation of what God will do in God’s promised future. Eugene Peterson writes of this last dimension of prayer:

All prayers, by definition, are directed to God, and this aim brings them, finally, into the presence of God where “everything that has breath” praises the Lord. Praise is the deep, even if often hidden, eschatological dimension in prayer.¹⁴

The book of Psalms ends with praise, song after song of praise, chorus after chorus of “hallelujah” (“Praise the LORD!”). The psalmists call on all creation to sing the Hallelujah Chorus—sea monsters, snow, and storms alike, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, human beings of all ages and stations in life, in a glorious polyphony of song (Pss 145–150).

The Psalter, then, teaches us how to pray rightly. We pray honestly, bringing our hurts and our hatreds as well as our joys and thanksgivings to God in prayer. And in the end, the Psalter also teaches us, such prayer leads to praise. It is the movement of Christian scripture, from the corruption of the earth in Gen 1–11 to the “hallelujahs” of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation. It is the movement of the high holy days of the church year, from the laments of Good Friday to the “hallelujahs” of Easter morning. And it is the movement of the Christian life. Even as we struggle with everyday realities of disappointment and grief, we recognize and celebrate signs of God’s in-breaking reign and we wait in hopeful anticipation for God’s promised future:

[A]ll prayer pursued far enough, becomes praise.... This is not a “word of praise” slapped onto whatever mess we are in at the moment. This crafted con-

¹⁴Peterson, *Answering God*, 123.

clusion for the Psalms tells us that our prayers are going to end in praise, but that it is also going to take awhile. Don't rush it. It may take years, decades even, before certain prayers arrive at the hallelujahs....Not every prayer is capped off with praise. In fact most prayers, if the Psalter is a true guide, are not. But prayer, a praying life, finally becomes praise....If we persist in prayer, laugh and cry, doubt and believe, struggle and dance and then struggle again, we will surely end up at Psalm 150, on our feet, applauding, "Encore! Encore!"¹⁵

BE LIKE A TREE

Back to the beginning: The same psalmist who invites us into a life of prayer and meditation on God's word also promises that such a life of prayer will grow into something beautiful. Those who follow her counsel will be "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither" (Ps 1:3).

Trees planted by streams of water are beautiful in any season and in any place. But particularly in the Near East, where the shade of a tree can be the difference between life and death, a tree is not only beautiful, but useful, and even necessary for life. A tree that gives both shade and fruit is a great gift indeed.

The lesson is clear, I tell my students: Be like a tree. Study *torah*, pray with the Psalms, pray with Jesus, enter into the privilege and the responsibility of a life of prayer and study, and (here's the point; here's where the tree imagery leads us) do it not just for yourself, but for those who will rest in your shade and be nourished by the fruit of your studies.

Be like a tree.

One of my own dear seminary professors, in a lovely sermon on Ps 1, tells about a Jewish prayer that is said "when someone catches sight of a particularly beautiful tree." The prayer goes like this: "Blessed are you O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has something like this in his world."¹⁶

My prayer for my students (and for all who pray the Psalms), echoes my teacher's. I pray that their practice of praying the Psalms and meditating on God's word would shape their lives in such a way that those who encounter them would be nourished and refreshed and would then bless God with these words: "Blessed are you O LORD our God, king of the universe, who has something (or someone) like this in his world." ⊕

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¹⁵Ibid., 127.

¹⁶Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depth*, 150.