

THE
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WAY

LEARNING TO READ THE

PSALMS

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“The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.”

– C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

The Psalms are the prayer book of Israel. The sacred songs of God's people, giving expression to their covenantal faith and trust in God. Originally written in the Hebrew language likely between the 9th and 5th century BC, the Psalms are penned by numerous authors. Many of them trace back to King David and reflect his deep intimacy with God, as well as significant moments in his own life; whether it was grieving over his own sin (Psalm 51), experiencing the sting of betrayal (Psalm 41), or celebrating God's faithfulness, goodness and guidance (Psalm 23), the vitality of David's faith leaps from the pages of his poetry.

The Psalms were the prayer book of Jesus. The ancient hymns of Israel were etched deeply into the tablet of Jesus' heart. He sang the Psalms, meditated on the Psalms, and allowed the Psalms to train his tongue in praising His Father in heaven. Evidence for Jesus' immersion in the Psalms is all over the Gospels. When predicting his betrayal, Jesus quotes Psalm 41:9 (John 13:18); when explaining how his ministry is the fulfillment of the Mosaic law, he quotes Psalms 35:19 and 64:4 (John 15:25); and, on the cross, he quotes Psalm 22:1 to express his terrible suffering (Matt. 27:46). The Psalms were an

ingrained part of Jewish spirituality in the 1st century and, therefore, a deeply ingrained part of the spirituality of Jesus.

The Psalms are the prayer book of the church—a training ground for prayer and praise to all those who would follow the way of Jesus. If we are to learn the language of prayer, the topography of prayer, and the raw, confusing, soul-awakening nature of prayer, there is no better school. Under the tutelage of the Psalms we learn the vocabulary of lament—expressing our anguish, loss and frustration to God. Through immersion in the Psalms, we make progress in the grammar of praise, which in the words of C.S. Lewis, is simply “. . . inner health made audible.” These ancient poems also school us in the art of confession and bring us face-to-face with the heaviness of hidden sin.

In other words, the Psalms invite us on a behind-the-scenes, no-holds-barred tour of human spirituality connected to the Creator of the Universe. Within them, we discover the ups and downs, twists and turns, breathtaking beauties and soul-crushing losses that a life lived in the presence of God involves—almost nothing is left out by the Psalter.

There are innumerable benefits to reading and, more importantly, praying the Psalms, but let us list four.

We Learn About the Character of God

Through praying the Psalms, we learn about the character of God.

Reading the Psalms reminds me (Chris) of the 17th century French mathematician, philosopher and inventor, Blaise Pascal. He was a brilliant man, conversant with the philosophies of his day, working steadily on a defense of the Christian faith that was later en-

titled, *Pensées*. One night he had a radical encounter with the living God that lasted several hours. He referred to it as a “night of fire.” As a result, he sewed these words into the lining of his jacket:

*The year of grace 1654,
Monday, 23 November, From about half past ten at night until
about half past midnight,
FIRE.
GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob not of the phi-
losophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Your GOD will be my
God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD. He
is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel. Grandeur of the hu-
man soul. Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have
known you.
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.*

Similar to Pascal’s “night of fire” in the Psalms, we don’t just encounter the God of the philosophers: the unmoved mover, the first cause, the uncaused being, or the divine mathematician that breathes life into our equations.

Instead, we encounter the lover, the warrior, the father, the mother, the friend, the rock, the fortress, the strong tower, the God Who is above all things, but deeply involved in His Creation and deeply concerned about His covenantal people—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In other words, we encounter God as God is, not as we would have Him to be. Such an encounter with the living God can be jarring.

As C.S. Lewis wrote when describing his own conversion:

An ‘impersonal God’—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (‘Man’s search for God!’) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?

The Psalms result from a spirituality that has encountered the living God. The Psalms are written by individuals who have been found by the God outside of themselves—God as Father, not god as fiction. They are poets who have been shocked by the live wire of His love, galvanized by the depth of His grace, floored by the forgiveness of their sins, and angered in moments when God’s consolations have seemingly disappeared from the horizon of their lives.

Through it all, the Psalms help us see and know God.

As Timothy and Kathy Keller write,

“The psalms help us see God—God not as we wish him, or hope him to be but as he actually reveals himself. The descriptions of God in the Psalter are rich beyond human invention. He is more holy, more

wise, more fearsome, more tender and loving than we would ever imagine him to be. The psalms fire our imaginations into new realms yet guide them toward the God who actually exists.”

The Psalms Helps Us Be Honest With Ourselves

The Psalter is not sanitized spirituality.

The Psalms aren't afraid to strike a note, or end up in a place, far removed from the curated worship experiences most of us are familiar with on a Sunday morning. Consider Psalm 88 which ends with the dire note that “darkness is my closest friend” or Psalm 139, which includes that “we are fearfully and wonderfully made” but ends on the frightening note, “Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord...I have nothing but hatred for them.”

I (Chris) have been frightened by the intensity of my negative emotions before, but when I read the Psalms I feel right at home in my shared humanity. As much as we wish it weren't the case, we covet, we hate, we lust and we lie—and a failure to admit it is us lying to ourselves.

One might say that the Bible is God's Word to us, while the Psalms are our words to God. God includes our words in His word, to let us know that the entirety of our human experience is welcome. Honest prayer starts with where we are, not with where we would like to be, nor with what we wish other people would see. The Psalms invite this type of raw honesty.

Our prayers are not always holy. Our prayers are not always tidy. Our prayers are, at times, sinful shouts of anger.

Sometimes, we bring the mess and God brings the mop.

And the Psalms tell us we are not alone in doing so.

The Psalms Skewer the Idol of Authenticity

We covet authenticity of expression to an increasing degree in our day. To “speak our truth” and “stand in our truth” is a high value in our post-modern society. Any externally imposed spirituality not only feels false, but can also be looked upon as an act of violence toward our autonomy and self-expression. Nevertheless, when our authentic desires become the center of our spirituality, we are turning authenticity and self-expression into an idol.

Praying the Psalms can act as the antidote.

By praying the Psalms, I am borrowing words that are not my own and praying my way into experiences that are not my own, in an attempt to enlarge my capacity to know and experience the God of Creation. I am not being left with only my “own stuff”, my own desires, my own expressions of faith, my own words—however authentic. Instead, I am being formed by the faith of the community, the experiences of the community, the words of the community, and the God who invites us into a faith that is bigger than ourselves. I am learning to pray my own prayers, by first praying the prayers of others.

In this way, “we” is not sacrificed on the altar of “me” and “me” is not sacrificed on the altar of “we.” Instead, praying the Psalm holds communal and self-expression in tension without falsely idolizing either. In doing so, the Psalms enlarge our ability to know and experience God, while also stretching our capacity for communal empathy, and skewering the idol of self-made spirituality.

The Psalms as a Lifeline

Nothing brings us to our knees quicker than desperation. Perhaps one of the most peculiar, and beautiful, benefits of reading the

Psalms is how they give us language to pray through the harshest things life throws at us. In this way, the Psalms have an acute ability to act as a lifeline – showing up as a welcome lifeboat when the chaos, confusion, and hostility of life threaten to all but drown us. Here, we (Elita and Chris) share our own stories of experiencing the Psalms in this deeply personal way:

Elita's Story

I remember the day the Psalms became a lifeline for me. I didn't know it at the time, but I was experiencing what would be the first of three eventual miscarriages. That hot, August afternoon, I laid on my couch praying like I hadn't prayed before. I hovered back and forth between desperate pleas and angry sobs—trying, in my own wounded way, to articulate something that couldn't be articulated. Sometimes prayers are much more guttural in nature than they are beautiful and eloquent.

Try as I may, it felt like words were sticking to the roof of my mouth—everything I prayed seemed dull, like language was failing me. After all, how does one find the right kind of words to beg the God of time and space to bend down low and please, save my baby. How does one simultaneously beg God, but also submit to him?

That's when I saw my Bible.

It was sitting right where it always sat: on our coffee table, in front of the very couch I was laying on, literally within arm's reach. My Bible was one of those fixed-items people have in their homes that they eventually stop seeing. You know what I mean. . .the pile of papers you've stopped noticing, the stack of books in the corner of the room, the donate-pile in the laundry room that's been growing for five years. That was my Bible. It was there, but it was more like a

decoration than a companion.

I reached over and grabbed it. Instinctively, I turned to Psalm 139 and began to read. As I read, I wept. I read it again and prayed the whole thing out loud. Again, I must have cried the entire time. How could I not, as I prayed things like “you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb” and “your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” Words that simultaneously professed God’s sovereignty, but also appealed to His fatherhood. Words that tethered my soul to truth and articulated what I had been unable to on my own. Words that gave me permission to somehow cry and grieve and hope all at the same time.

I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I held onto my Bible for dear life that day. I was on doctor-ordered bed rest so I spent the rest of my day reading the majority of the Psalms. I cried through many of them, wrestled through some, and didn’t understand plenty of them. Along the way, though, I found language that helped me to bridge the gap between hope and grief, lament and joy. The prayers of the Psalms weren’t a magic-bullet or a quick fix that day but they were most certainly a lifeline.

That night we lost our first baby. It was everything you would imagine: sad, heartbreaking, confusing. But, perhaps miraculously—maybe even mercifully—my faith was still intact. Stronger, even. I have always attributed this to the fact that I’d spent the day with God in the Psalms. That was 18 years ago now but, from time to time, I think back to that day. Usually each August. And while I remember the grief and the pain, I remember more the nearness of Jesus, the way he ministered to me through his Word, and the way he taught me to pray.

Bonhoeffer, who had a deep love for and conviction about praying the Psalms, once wrote that these prayers in the Bible are “the steps on which we find our way to God.” I like that. It’s probably why I’ve kept on praying the Psalms. They’ve never failed to help me find my way to God, and on occasion, help me find my way back to God.

Chris’ Story

When I lost my dad over a year ago, it was the most intense grief I had felt up until that point in my life. I didn’t like the limitations grief imposed on me. The lack of motivation.

The feeling of always being tired. Slipping in and out of semi-depressive states. My inability to predict when waves of sadness would wash over me. Being sucker punched by grief both unexpectedly and frequently had me off kilter for months. It made me feel vulnerable and always on the edge of being exposed.

Recently, I was talking to a member of our church, whose mother lives a province away, but is nearing the end of her life. We were discussing grief and, as I reflected on my experience, it felt like the ground was opening up at my feet again. I went tumbling back down into the deep hole of loss intensified by the sense of “if only.”

“If only we had ten more years.”

“If only I could talk to him about our children’s joys and struggles.”

“If only he could have retired and traveled with mom.”

“If only he could see us launch this college.”

I will live with the “if only” for the rest of my life.

In my grief, both then and now, the imagery of Psalm 23 has ministered deeply to me. Most people know the words: “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.”

I read these words in the hospital room the night he passed away.

In the grief, I had to let God lead me to green pastures and beside still waters to restore my soul.

Grief squeezed productivity out of my life for a season and I had to make peace with being a human being and not a human doing. During this time, I found the picture of God we encounter in Psalm 23 was so refreshing. It reminded me that God is not trying to run us into the ground. God has no interest in us being haggard, hurried and worried. God is not trying to chew us up and spit us out.

God isn't trying to ruin our lives.

He wants to restore our lives.

He wants to refresh us.

He understands our weakness and limitations, and meets us in that place.

God is a good shepherd. And He walks with you in the deepest, darkest valleys.

The imagery in Psalm 23 was a lifeline for me.

DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF PSALMS

There are many different types of Psalms. Scholars separate the Psalms in different ways by using different categories, but we wanted to provide a brief introduction to some of the various forms. Below we highlight Psalms of Lament, Cursing Psalms, Thanksgiving Psalms, Creation Psalms, and Psalms of Ascent.

Psalms of Lament

O God, why have you rejected us forever?

Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?

Remember the nation you purchased long ago,

the people of your inheritance, whom you redeemed—

Mount Zion, where you dwelt.

Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins,

all this destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary.

Your foes roared in the place where you met with us;

they set up their standards as signs.

*They behaved like men wielding axes
to cut through a thicket of trees.
They smashed all the carved paneling
with their axes and hatchets.
They burned your sanctuary to the ground;
they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.
They said in their hearts, "We will crush them completely!"
They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.
We are given no signs from God;
no prophets are left,
and none of us knows how long this will be.
How long will the enemy mock you, God?
Will the foe revile your name forever?
Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand?
Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!*

Psalm 74:1-11 (NIV2011)

Psalm 74 is a Psalm of Lament—one of many found in the Psalter. Some scholars have estimated that one-third of the Psalms are Psalms of Lament.

Lament might also sound like:

“How long until justice rolls down like mighty waters?”

“How long until you break the teeth of the wicked?”

“How long until you bring a sword of justice down on the oppressor?”

“How much more blood will flow from the veins of the martyrs until you answer their cries for recompense?”

“How long until you comfort the mourning and lift up the

downcast?”

“How long until you wipe away all tears?”

“How long until the table is set and the children are gathered in-no longer broken?”

How long?

How long is the language of lament; how long is the vocabulary of longing—the sigh of the tired soul clinging on to the hope of tomorrow. How long is the natural tongue of a heart attuned to the cries of the hurting. How long is the cry of a heart primed for action; a soul ready to give, serve, protest, pray and participate in the kingdom come.

How long is an utterance of faith when life hurts like hell.

Faith that God will hear. Faith that God will comfort. Faith that God will right all wrongs. Faith that God will make wars cease from the ends of the earth. Faith that God will, one day, wipe away all tears.

Lament is also holding God to His promises, wondering aloud why He doesn't seem to be coming through.

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote, “Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart.”

The Psalms of Lament give us permission to be patient with all that is unresolved in our hearts.

The tension between what “is” and what “ought” to be.

The gap between God's promises and our current situation.

God, You are the provider!

But we are still waiting for Your provision....

God, You are the healer!

But we are still waiting for health....

God, you are the deliverer!

But I still feel shackled to shame.....

Waiting is never forever.

But it can feel like it.

So in the time in-between we need patience for all that is unresolved in our hearts.

The Psalms of Lament give space for that lack of resolution.

In the end, to pray the Psalms of Lament will keep us from pretending, stripping away our plastic smiles and forced fakiness. To embrace the Lament Psalms will help us realize we are not alone in our anguish, creating space for authentic community when life hurts. The Psalms of Lament also become a natural part of our healing journey, acknowledging our pain without allowing us to collapse into ourselves like a dying star. Because, as is often the case in the Psalter, the Laments usually end on a note of hope, reminding us always that God is near to the broken-hearted, and the best is yet to come.

Psalms of Lament are scarce in the modern church, but here the lyrics of one from the song-writer Cory Asbury:

*Sometimes marriages don't work
And sometimes babies die
Sometimes rehab turns to relapse
And your left just asking why
And for all the prayers I prayed, I still wonder if He's real
And if He is, how is He choosing who He does and doesn't heal
I've tried to run from Jesus
I've started holy wars
I've tried the patient waiting
And the kicking down the doors*

*I've cursed His name in anger
 With my fist raised to the sky:
 And in return
 All He's ever been is kind
 Selah.*

Cursing Psalms

Cursing Psalms are sometimes referred to as Imprecatory Psalms. If the Psalms are the shining jewel of Scripture's canon, the favourite of saints and sages throughout Church history, the cursing Psalms might be viewed as the imperfections and blights littered throughout the precious stone of the Psalter.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
 when we remembered Zion.
 There on the poplars
 we hung our harps,
 for there our captors asked us for songs,
 our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
 they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
 How can we sing the songs of the LORD
 while in a foreign land?
 If I forget you, Jerusalem,
 may my right hand forget its skill.
 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not consider Jerusalem
 my highest joy.
 Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did*

*on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down,” they cried,
“tear it down to its foundations!”
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to u
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.*

Psalm 137 (NIV2011)

Psalm 137 is a classic example of a cursing Psalm: harsh, intense, jarring, brutal in its language and seemingly sub-Christian. Such an impression is well justified on first reading. Before jumping to conclusions, however, recall the words we wrote in the introduction.

The Bible is not written *to* us, but it is written *for* us.

Scripture is intended to be received as God’s word for us, while the Psalms may be understood as our words before God. God includes our words in His word, to let us know that the entirety of our human experience is welcome. Honest prayer starts with where we are, not with where we would like to be. When it comes to the cursing Psalms, context is always key.

The above Psalm reflects the experience of Israel (the two tribes of Judah) in exile. Jerusalem has been razed to the ground. The temple has been destroyed. Their way of life was left in tatters. The Babylonians had treated them brutally and their friends, parents, spouses, siblings and children had been killed. There is an intensity of anger and grief above that seems entirely natural—anger, hatred, a deep-seated loathing that expresses itself in vile language.

Vile language to match vile deeds.

I hope to cultivate a spirituality that rids my heart of hate toward any person, while keeping intact a holy hatred of sin that offends God and ruins lives.

Sadly, it is often hard to draw a line between sin and sinner.

So what do we do when we recognize that hate can live in the human heart toward people—not just what they do, but who they are (!) What do we do when it flares up and rears its ugly head?

Pretending it is not there is unhelpful.

Acting on my hate is damaging to the human community and to my own heart.

So what do I do?

To answer that question is to experience the gift of the cursing Psalms. To quote Philip Yancey,

“If a person wrongs me unjustly, I have several options. I can seek personal revenge, a response condemned by the Bible. I can deny or suppress my feelings of hurt and anger. Or I can take those feelings to God, entrusting God with the task of ‘retributive justice’. The cursing Psalms are vivid examples of that last option. ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord—prayers like the cursing psalms place vengeance in the proper hands.”

Other cursing Psalms to consider: Psalm 5, 17, 35

Psalms of Thanksgiving

Praise the LORD.

Praise God in his sanctuary;

*praise him in his mighty heavens.
Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipe,
praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.*

Psalm 150 (NIV2011)

One of the most interesting philosophical implications of the Biblical doctrine of creation is not that creation “is.” Rather, it is that creation did not have to be. In the Biblical view of reality, creation is not the result of some kind of physical, or even divine, necessity. Creation was a free choice of the Creator. The cosmos did not result from some lack in God, as though the Trinity was lonely and needed us.

Instead, creation results from an overflow of divine generosity and love.

Creation has always been an invitation to participate in the inner life and love of the Triune God.

Creation is a free, completely undeserved gift and the proper response to a gift is gratitude.

Therefore, to live in-sync with reality is to live with profound gladness.

Praise and thanksgiving are entirely appropriate.

Nothing could be more reasonable.

The Psalms of thanksgiving grasp this truth.

Not only that, nothing could be more reasonable and more loving than God saying to us, “Worship me” and us saying to one another, in the manner of the Psalmist, “Come let us worship Him together.”

God doesn’t need to get our worship, or thanksgiving.

We need to give it.

God inviting our worship does not reflect a neediness in God.

It reflects a neediness in us.

In fact, if we don’t give our worship to God, we will give it to lesser things that might dazzle our eyes, but in the end will starve our souls.

The Novelist David Foster Wallace grasped this truth, though he was not a believer. In his oft-quoted words:

“In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you..... Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. And so on.”

To repeat, if we do not give our praise to God, we will set the affections of our hearts on lesser things.

The Biblical doctrine of creation tells us that life is a gift.

There is a giver.

He alone is worthy of worship.

Praise and thanksgiving are entirely appropriate.

To close this section in the words of C.S. Lewis,

“The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. ... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game. ... 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 till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. . . . 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.”

To enjoy God by praising Him is the continual gift the Psalms of thanksgiving give to us.

Other Thanksgiving Psalms to consider: Psalm 34, 92, 100

Creation Psalms

For the director of music. According to gittith. A psalm of David.

LORD, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory

in the heavens.

Through the praise of children and infants

you have established a stronghold against your enemies,

to silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens,

the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars,

which you have set in place,

what is mankind that you are mindful of them,

human beings that you care for them?

You have made them a little lower than the angels

and crowned them with glory and honor.

You made them rulers over the works of your hands;

you put everything under their feet:

all flocks and herds,

and the animals of the wild,

*the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Psalms 8 (NIV2011)

I (Elita) love the Creation Psalms. Though I'm no outdoor enthusiast, it's not hard for me to want to get outside when I read words like David's in Psalm 8. I think of some of the gorgeous places I've been in my life, many of them right here on our West Coast, where I've seen the kind of sheer beauty that left me at a loss for words. Usually, in those moments, I stand there slack-jawed, only able to think something to the effect of "Wow, God. You are incredible."

One particular time, my family took a last-minute detour into Yosemite Valley. I remember standing at the base of El Cap, a 3,000-ft mountain with a nearly vertical granite wall, and feeling overcome by two things: God's greatness and my insignificance. I wasn't having an insecurity crisis; rather, I was having a "who am I" moment. This is what David is referring to in Psalm 8: "who am I" moments are the kind that acknowledge God's magnitude, but also wonder at the fact that this great, big, creative God also leans down close to us, chooses us, loves us, and—mercifully—sent His son for us. I think this is the natural posture our hearts should take when we remember or experience God's majesty. And so, words like the ones in Psalm 8 make me want to get out and experience more of that—the inarticulate beauty of God in creation.

Maybe it stirs up the same desire in you, too.

But as inspired as we may be to get outside and worship God for His handiwork, this wasn't the only intent of the Creation Psalms. These particular Psalms also hold a much deeper meaning.

The Psalms were penned during a time when it was common to deify creation. Ancient people groups regularly worshiped the sun, the moon, the stars, and other elements of creation as gods. But then along came this tiny nation, a people called Israel, and they held a vastly different view of creation than the surrounding peoples. Rather than worshipping creation, they pointed to a Creator. Rather than bowing to the stars, they declared there is One who made the stars. Ultimately, the Creation Psalms acted as a stake in the ground for the people of Israel to declare with their mouths that, regardless of what the surrounding cultures might proclaim, they would worship Yahweh alone. They would be a set-apart people for his Namesake.

I wonder if the Creation Psalms don't continue to serve the same purpose for us today? Could it be that, as we pray declarations like the ones found in Psalm 8, they remind us (as they surely reminded ancient Israel) that in the midst of a culture that looks to lesser gods, we are to confidently proclaim that Yahweh is Lord over it all? Could it be that when we look at the moon, the stars, and the heavens, we are once again reminded that He alone made it all?

These psalms are reminders that He alone holds it all, and that He alone is to be worshiped.

As we pray the language of psalms like Psalm 8, may we remember that they are not only a witness to God's beauty, but also to His Lordship. And like David, may we stand in awe and profound gratitude that this wildly amazing God looks on us with deep love.

Other Creation Psalms to consider: Psalms 19, 65, 96, 148

Psalms of Ascent

A song of ascents. Of David.

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”

Our feet are standing

in your gates, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is built like a city

that is closely compacted together.

That is where the tribes go up—

the tribes of the LORD—

to praise the name of the LORD

according to the statute given to Israel.

There stand the thrones for judgment,

the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

“May those who love you be secure.

May there be peace within your walls

and security within your citadels.”

For the sake of my family and friends,

I will say, “Peace be within you.”

For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,

I will seek your prosperity.

Psalm 122 (NIV2011)

The practice of pilgrimage seems to have re-emerged in the last few decades. Places like the Via Francigena in Europe, or the Camino de Santiago in Spain, two of the oldest and most famous pilgrimage

routes in the world, have been thrust into the public eye through Instagram feeds, movies and travel magazines. But no matter the reason for its sudden appearance in mainstream popularity, pilgrimage isn't a new idea. In fact, it's a deeply Biblical idea.

The ancient Israelites regularly made pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for major festivals. For some, especially those who lived far from the temple, this was no small journey. It meant packing up family, provisions, tents, and animals and preparing for several days (sometimes weeks) away from home. But the purpose of such a strenuous journey was clear for them: they were on pilgrimage, they were going "up" (ascending), to worship Yahweh. Every inconvenience of their travel, every difficulty of the journey, was seen in light of this singular purpose: We are on pilgrimage to our God.

The Psalms of Ascent (or Pilgrimage psalms) gave language for this practice of the people journeying, or ascending, to the temple. One scholar notes that they likely sang some of these Psalms on their journey, including Psalm 122. Look at verse 1:

*I rejoiced when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"*

Although these psalms functioned in a practical way for Israel (because they sang them on their literal pilgrimage), they also functioned as a metaphor for life. I think this remains true for us today.

Everyone journeys through life. But for the follower of Jesus, life is not meant to be an aimless wandering. We are not out here, fingers crossed, hoping for the best. In declaring that the Christian life is a pilgrimage, we are naming something important. We are saying, in essence:

I'm headed somewhere.

I've got a destination in mind.

I'm not aimless.

I'm in pursuit of Jesus.

And my pilgrimage—however long it may be—will end in his presence.

The Psalms of Ascent are not suggesting this makes the plot points of our individual journeys any easier and they aren't pushing us in that direction, either. These Psalms acknowledge the frailty of life, even when it's done in tandem with God (see Psalm 120). We know that followers of Jesus whose hearts are set on pilgrimage still experience heartbreak, devastating doctor's reports, overwhelming betrayal, etc. But I do think the Psalms of Ascent give us language to remind us that pilgrimage is a metaphor for life, enabling us to pray things like:

"As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people." (Psalm 125:2)

"Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy." (Psalm 126:5)

"Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord" (Psalm 130:1)

Other Psalms of Ascent to consider: Psalm 120, 121, 123-134

REFLECTIONS FROM THE WAY COMMUNITY

As we dive into the Psalms as a church, we asked members and artists of our community to submit short written reflections and art pieces inspired from their experience reading the Psalms.

“I love when God surprises me through His Word. Lately, I’ve been reading through the Psalms hoping to be surprised, hoping to see something new, hoping for God to meet me in the moment. Before long, the Psalms in my Bible became covered with underlines and notes about these surprises. He met me on days where I needed joy and he encouraged me to sing a new song of praise. He met me on days where I felt alone and he let me know that he’s ever-present. He met me on days where I needed to lament and he showed me how He listens. In the midst of seeking surprises, God’s consistency shines through.

As I’ve read the Psalms, over and over I’ve seen that God is good; He is faithful and kind. Over and over, I’ve seen that God is powerful; He is in complete control. Over and over, I’ve experienced how he listens to my prayers and watches over me. Over and over, I’ve felt his steadfast love and have been reminded that he promised and sent a Saviour.

There are days where I struggle to believe each one of these perfectly. Today, I didn’t want to believe that God is good, but then he reminded me to pick some numbers from 1 to 150 and see what’s already been underlined.”

– Michael Lloyd



Dory Xu

Acrylic on Canvas

Inspired by the beauty of God's creation and all the colourful imagery painted in the Psalms.

“As a worship leader, I am always learning from the book of Psalms. As I plan setlists and times of singing together I try to keep three specific patterns in mind that emerge from the Psalms. I am learning to see these patterns as ongoing invitations.

First, the Psalms invite us to keep God’s character in focus. Over and over again the poets remind us who God is. God is strong. God is speaking. God is good. He is our salvation. God is loving and faithful. The Psalms invite us to keep God’s true character in focus no matter what we feel.

Second, the Psalms invite us to remember what God has done. They move us toward trust and thanksgiving in the present by recounting God’s faithfulness in the past. We can know God will be our deliverer in the future because he has delivered His people in the past. If you are anything like me (and the Israelites) then you tend to let current circumstances cause a dangerous type of forgetfulness. But a Psalm inspired worship set is one that looks backward in order to appropriately frame the present and anticipate the future.

Third, the Psalms invite us to be honest. The Psalms encourage authentic, non-robotic worship. The Psalms undeniably invite us to bring our questions, our rawness and our deepest pain into His presence.

I often encourage worship leaders to keep these things in mind as they plan setlists. To lead in-sync with the Psalms is to sing about who God is and what God has done, while also offering our honest thoughts and prayers through the lens of God’s proven faithfulness.

Look for patterns in the Psalms! God intends for them to lead us in worship.”

– Jeremy King

“When I think of my love of the Psalms, I am reminded of that small hospital room, on a brisk January morning. My husband’s beloved grandmother, ‘Oma’, lay in bed, frail and vulnerable, her breaths laboured. As we cloistered ourselves by her side, the nurse encouraged us to say our goodbyes. Yet, in that moment, our words failed us.

How to adequately convey our profound love for her, our great sadness and grief in the face of death, our joy in the knowledge of her salvation, our faith in the resurrection life ahead of her, our resolve to trust in the Lord?

Then my husband opened his tattered Bible to the Psalms. Together, we read Psalm 16 and Psalm 23 over Oma in quiet whispers. We sang the anthem of praise that is Psalm 95. In tears, we reminded her of the psalmist’s words, “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. . .” (Psalm 84:10).

That day in the hospital room, I experienced the power of the Psalms afresh—the way this collection of 150 poems so deftly represents the full gamut of human emotions. Whether we need to express tearful lament, shouts of joy, fear-filled questions, earnest repentance, or unabashed adoration for God, the Psalter is a vehicle for our prayers. It unfailingly gives us words when we don’t have any. These Scriptures are an invitation for you and I to echo the cries and praise of God’s people, from every age. What a gift, to join their voices through these ancient prayers—no matter what your ‘today’ holds.”

– Jess Thiessen



Rees Morgan

Digital

Inspired by Psalm 103 and the idea of a life lived for the Lord is a life that flourishes like a flower.

“The Psalms have shown me what it means to be a human being under God. I am often tempted by a lofty spirituality that is not really tethered to the ground, or honest to the subterranean movements of my soul. The Psalms are too human to allow for such a way of relating to the Living God. They invite me into this profound Christian paradox that holds up both who God truly is and who I truly am without compromising on either; giving me permission to say prayers that are audacious and bold, while still approaching God with a holy fear and trepidation—to behold God’s holiness and grandeur, while being honest and not hiding the fickleness and darkness in my own heart. It’s in these tensions that I’ve found the Psalms shaping me into a Psalmist. A Psalmist who prays and writes with an honesty that struggles its way to worship. A Christian who is learning to quietly whisper ‘help’ or loudly scream ‘why’ while slowly inching toward ‘yet I will praise you.’”

– Jaden Neufeld

“To me, the Psalms are a reflection of scribbled entries written and not yet written in my life long journal. The Psalms are what I can hang on to when my hands are tired and slipping. They are my prayers when I’m hurting too much to tell God my own vulnerable thoughts and overwhelming feelings. The Psalms are my reminder, with hopefully more life ahead of me than behind me in my twenties, that times of tragedy and sorrow lie ahead and that is okay, because God is as close as my breath. When my emotions feel overwhelming and unnatural, I find comfort in the Psalmists’ writings that so beautifully show that others have been through what I have been through; that the human condition has not varied over the past few thousands of years and neither has God’s character. My hope is that, amidst a world of uncertainty, each poem would bring us to know the mysterious nearness of God our Healer, God our Friend, God our King, and God our Hope.”

– Mariah Smith



Taya Corbett

Digital

Inspired by Psalm 88

“Although I grew up in a Christian home and came to faith early, my journey into a deeper relationship with God has not always been straightforward. In fact, if I’m honest, it’s been rather convoluted and has often involved a lot of questions and doubts. Where is God when things are hard? Does He really love me? Why do I sometimes feel like God has abandoned me? Why is my life so difficult while I’m trying to follow Him yet some completely self-absorbed people seem to have it so easy? Having been raised in a conservative home, questioning God was not easy and—to be honest,—seemed a bit presumptuous. And then I discovered, as if it were for the first time, the raw honesty and depth of the Psalms. Here were people who were not afraid to ask the hard questions and to put them to God directly. “Why, Lord, do you stand so far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10) “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? (Ps. 82) “Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” (Ps. 22) “My soul is in deep anguish? How long, Lord, how long?” (Ps. 6) And through these writers, I learned that not only were my questions valid, asking them directly of God without fear was my path to a deeper relationship with God. Even now, although it’s many years later and my questions have changed, that dialogue is still an important part of my everyday walk with God and continuing faith in Him.”

– David Wiebe

“It feels cliché, but I fell in love with the Psalms when I lost all words to pray. It was one of those long seasons of sorrow. I was hurting, people around me were hurting, and my capacity was at zero. The kind of season where you spend a lot of time on your knees, soaked in tears. The kind of season where you can’t muster a picture of hope even if you tried. It was really a season of surrender - “I can’t do this on my own, even pray.”

I had read the Psalms hundreds of times in life, but it was the first time I needed them so desperately, and they completely cracked me open. They would soften my heart every time. They would give me words when I had none. They spoke out strength when I had none to speak. It felt like a real-time experience of what God means when He says He will sustain us. They were my life preserver.

I could feel Jesus so gently in them, especially the laments. They gave me permission to feel boldly. It can be scary to be so angry and disappointed in God... What if I admit it and can never find my way back to him? But the psalms are like a guide into unknown territory. I knew they’d be able to go to the darkest parts of my heart, even the parts I was too scared to go to alone, while always leading me back to the truth.”

- Colleen Little



Alex Burke

Photography

Inspired by Psalm 4:6-8

“I was initially drawn to Psalms around the same time that the Lord cultivated my heart for worship. Lacking the words and maturity as a kid to process grief, I found joy and hope in the songs that I sang at church. I quickly made the connection that many modern worship songs directly quoted verses from Psalms— poets who also found themselves lamenting and praising the Lord through music despite their difficult circumstances.

As I grew as a worship leader, the depth of my worship correlated to the amount of times that I revisited the Psalms. In a role where it is so easy to slip into routine and performance, God used the Psalms to humble me, reminding me over and over again of three things: who we worship, how we worship, and why we worship.

I’ve learned that through the Psalms, we join in the song sung throughout the generations. Our God is the Defender who fights for us and the Rock that will never fail us; He is the only thing worthy of our worship. The Psalms also point us as worshippers to the fresh revelation of God’s glory revealed through Jesus Christ. At the heart of all we do and sing is the Messiah that intercedes for us and brings us hope and salvation.”

– Vivian Cheung

Thank you for taking the time to read this introduction to the Psalms. We hope it serves as a helpful companion as you make your way through these ancient poems. What's more, we trust that you will find in the Psalms the same solace and comfort expressed by the members of our community above. Finally, whether you are new to the Psalms, or an old friend of the Psalms, we pray that as you take the time to get in them, that they will, in turn, get in you.