DP3.08 God's Prayer Book

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Introduction

That ancient treasury of prayers, the Psalms, has much to teach us about talking to God. In this final article in our series on prayer, we explore the rich and varied nature of God's own prayer book, and find out how we can make best use of it in our own prayers.

The always quotable Martin Luther described the Psalms as "a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible."

We began to see the truth of this observation in our look at 'praise' in Briefing #173. As the psalmists advertise God's majesty and loving kindness, all the great themes of the Old Testament are recalled and celebrated. When we open the Psalms, we meet the God of the whole Bible in all his creative power, kingship, justice, righteousness, holiness and love. However, we also meet mankind responding to God. We see Israel reacting with joy and celebration to what God has done, and continues to do. We hear her heartfelt prayers, longings, struggles, failures and hopes. We see her praising, but we also see her complaining to God, struggling with the reality of evil and injustice, and begging for salvation.

In a unique way, the Psalms reveal the relationship between God and his people in action. As Israel responds to Yahweh, we have vocalized for us a model of interaction with God that teaches us about God, ourselves and how we relate to him. We see God's people talking to God, but in God's kindness, these prayers are also his word to us. What was spoken through the mouth of David was also spoken by the Holy Spirit.

It is no surprise, then, that the Psalms have always been a rich source and encouragement for Christian prayer. For this is what prayer is – it is our relationship with God in action as we speak to him (see D. B. Knox's article in Briefing #172). Because the Psalms give us so many examples of this happening, they serve as both a model and a resource for our prayer lives – God's prayer book, if you like.

Even so, sometimes the Psalms can seem as strange and difficult to use as some other prayer books have been. Especially if we start from Psalm 1 and simply keep reading, there seems to be a preoccupation with enemies and personal vendettas that we find hard to identify with. All those metaphoric lions tearing limb from limb, bones being crushed, and hearts melting like wax. It is the language of the pit, and sometimes our rather more sedate lifestyle seems far removed from it all. Then there are the curses called down upon the psalmist's enemies, such as in Psalm 109:

> "May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow, May his children be wandering beggars; May they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; May strangers plunder the fruits of his labours."

This is not the stuff of our early morning Prayer time. We find it hard to imagine ourselves praying, "Lord, repay that greengrocer who short-changed me the other day. May his bananas over-ripen. May worms eat his quinces. May the emus kick down his outhouse."

How can we make sense of such a large, variegated and at times 'strange' book as the Psalms? How can we make best use of this ancient prayer book that God has provided for us?

In this article, we will begin to answer these questions. In particular, we shall see that perhaps the greatest single lesson the Psalter has for our prayer lives is in the relationship between prayer and praise.

Prayer in the Psalms

The psalms are not a collection of prayers, as such. They are lyric poems, most of which it seems were originally set to music and used within the corporate religious life of Israel. Some are certainly in the form of prayers addressed to God, but many are not. Many of the 'praise' psalms, for example, are addressed to the congregation, or to the nations, or even to oneself ("bless the LORD, O my soul").

Even so, we do meet numerous examples in the Psalms of godly Israelites calling out to their God, if not as Father (in the characteristic NT sense) then certainly as Creator, Mighty Deliverer, and Covenant-Keeper. We read examples of them asking, confessing, pleading and interceding.

The characteristic prayer of the Psalms is the 'lament', in which the psalmist cries out to God for deliverance from the misery and suffering of his circumstances. Psalm 22 is a classic example:

For the director of music. To [the tune of] "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.

> "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent."
>
> (Psalm 22:1-2)

Here, as in all the laments, the psalmist cries out to God not as a stranger but as a child of the covenant. He calls out 'O my God', for he knows this God, and expects him to hear and to answer. All true prayer is like this – it proceeds from a prior relationship with God, a relationship which God himself has initiated and established.

In fact, it is the very existence of this prior relationship, which gives the lament its passionate and urgent tone. The cry of frustration and dereliction that we meet so often in the Psalms only arises because the psalmist looks at his situation and his relationship with God and says: "This should not be! If you are Yahweh, the Mighty Creator and Covenant Redeemer, and you are my God, then why am I suffering like this? Deliver me, O my God!"

There is no mincing of words, no pretending that things are better than they are. Psalm 22 is typical in using the most vivid metaphors to evoke the suffering:

> "Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots

for my clothing."

(Psalm 22:12-18)

Throughout the Psalms, laments such as this are prompted by various circumstances – enemies, persecution, physical suffering, awareness of sin, and all manner of personal hardship. The lament can also be communal or national, as in Psalm 89, where the nation cries out to God for deliverance from exile.

The prayer of lament springs, in other words, from the broken, sinful world in which God's people find themselves. It is so now for us, as much as it was for them. We live in a frustrated and creaking world, where the creation is subjected to futility, as Romans 8 puts it. This is the chapel for our prayers. Christian prayer takes place between the times, as we await the return of our Lord, the redemption of our bodies and the liberation of all creation.

As the laments of the Psalms express this struggle to be God's person in the midst of a godless world, we have our own struggles mirrored and voiced with a power and imagery that is breathtaking at times. We cannot always precisely pray their prayer, word for word, lion for lion, but their experience resonates deeply with our own.

The life of praise and lament

We saw in our last Briefing how prominent 'praise' is in the Psalms. But how does this relate to the equally strong strain of lament, of which Psalm 22 is just one example? How, in other words, does praise fit together with prayer?

In many ways, the psalms can be characterised as a constant movement or cycle between praise and lament. Praise – which is the remembrance and declaration of what God has done – is the basis for lament, but also its conclusion. Psalm 22, which we have been looking at, is a good example of this.

After the initial cry of despair in verses 1-2, the psalmist explains just why he is calling out to this God. It is because of God's impeccable record:

"Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.

In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.

They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed."

(Psalm 22:3-5)

This is the God he knows, the God he expects to be near at hand, and yet who now seems so far away. He returns to his lament (in vv. 6-8), for although, like his fathers, he trusts in the saving power of God, he is yet to be saved. You delivered them, he seems to be saying, but what about me?

"But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.""

(Psalm 22:6-8)

Then he pauses to remember that God has been his deliverer, throughout his life. He praises God again, telling out what God has done for him, and then begging God to do it again:

> "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no-one to help."
>
> (Psalm 22:9-11)

The remembrance and declaration of God's character and deeds (i.e. 'praise') is the starting point for the psalmist's prayer. It is the reason why he prays in the first place, and it is the basis for his confidence that God will again act to redeem him.

In this particular psalm, the deliverance does come – and before the end of the psalm. There is a shift in time between verses 21 and 22, and it becomes apparent that the whole thing has been written after the longed-for salvation has come. No-one can say what sort of tune 'Doe of the Morning' was, but we can imagine that this is where the key changed from minor to major, and the trumpets and lyres and harps and cymbals came crashing in as the psalmist says:

> "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honour him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
>
> For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.
>
> From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfil my vows.
>
> The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the LORD will praise him – may your hearts live for ever!"
>
> (Psalm 22:22-26)

In response to God's deliverance, the psalmist once again declares in the congregation the power and faithfulness of Yahweh, and he exhorts everyone to join in the praise. In Psalm 22, the concluding celebration of praise is explicit. In other psalms, it is only in prospect:

> "Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me."
>
> (Psalm 142:6-7)

It is very hard to find a psalm of lament in which there is no prospect of praise. It is a striking feature of prayer in the psalms that it is so relentlessly forward-looking. Its basis is praise, and its hope is again to praise, to be able to advertise once more the saving power of God.

Prayer, the Psalms and Us

This cycle – or perhaps spiral – from praise to lament and back to praise is the shape of the godly life in the Psalms, as it is for us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Christian prayer, like

the prayers of the psalmists, looks back to God's mighty redemption for us, and forward to the final deliverance. We remember and celebrate that God has adopted us as his children and given us his Spirit, so that we might call him 'Abba, Father'. And we look forward to the second appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, longing for the salvation and liberation that his coming will bring.

We may not have seen too many strong bulls of Bashan lately, but we understand with the psalmists what a battle it can be to live faithfully between what God has done and what God will do. The anguish and gritty realism of the Psalms reflects our own struggle to trust our God when the difficulties of our hostile world and the weakness of our own flesh overwhelm us.

Even so, as we read the Psalms, and draw encouragement and example from them for our own prayers, we need to remember that there are discontinuities as well. A great deal has happened in the outworking of God's plans since the time when David took up his lyre. The temple is no longer a bricks-and-mortar centre for religious life – now we are all temples by virtue of God's Spirit dwelling within us; forgiveness is no longer mediated through cultic ritual and sacrifice – now we receive pardon through the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of Christ; Jerusalem is no longer a centre for political and national hopes – now it is a heavenly city in which all God's people (Jew and Gentile) have citizenship; and the Messiah is no longer a powerful world ruler only in prospect – now the true Messiah has come.

In Christ, all that the Psalms prefigured and foreshadowed is fulfilled. We now read the Psalms with the mind of Christ, from this side of the cross and resurrection. Indeed, the very psalm we have been looking at in this article, Psalm 22, has gained significance quite beyond its original context by the extraordinary way it relates to the crucifixion. On the cross, we see the godly but Godforsaken Man who trusts in the Lord and is delivered.

What all this means is that when we come to a given psalm, we may not always be able to pray it word for word as our own prayer. For a start, many of them are simply not prayers, as we have seen. And even those that are in the form of prayers may represent circumstances in which the details are quite different from our own – either because of the particular thing being prayed for, or because of the stage of biblical history in which the prayer is being offered.

The Psalms, in other words, is not a prayer book necessarily to be prayed rote. Sometimes we can simply turn to a psalm and make its prayer our own, but this is not always, or even often, the case.

We would do better to view the Psalms as a **handbook for prayer**, to shape and guide our prayers, to encourage us in prayers, to fill our minds and hearts with godly words and ideas for prayer. Like all Scripture, this is why the Psalms are written down for us:

> "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."
>
> (Romans 15:4)

The cycle of praise and lament reflected in the Psalms is the reality of life in relationship with God in this present evil age. And because the Psalms inhabit that same world, and give voice to it in such variety, and with such power, our prayers will always benefit from being soaked in them.

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