

Praying Like the Psalmists: Believing in the God of the Psalmists

Introduction:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
O Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!
If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.
I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD!
for with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.*

-Psalm 130

Many of us read prayers like these from the psalmists and long to pray as they did. We long to stretch the lofty heights of praise, descend to the depths of sorrow, grasp the amazing expanse of imagery and language they did. We adopt and quote their phrases. We sometimes repeat the psalms themselves. We analyze, categorize, and subdivide the psalms. All of this will help us grow in prayer. However, the very first step in praying as the psalmists is not about the kinds of psalms they wrote, the images they used, or even the words they employed. The fundamental key to praying like the psalmists is believing in their God. More than saying, "Oh yeah, I believe in the God of the Bible," we must develop a gut level faith in the God the psalmists revealed. When we believe in their God, praying like they did will come naturally.

Discussion:

- I. God is.
 - A. Perhaps this goes without saying. Yet, the psalmists prayed because they believed God really does exist.
 1. **Psalm 14:1**—"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"
 2. **Psalm 53:1**—"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"
 - B. We must not take this point for granted because so many face the hardships the psalmists lamented by losing their faith in God. Despite the hardships, trials, tribulations and struggles of the psalmists, they kept praying because they did not view hardship and suffering as proof for atheism. Rather, hardship and suffering were simply times to go to the God in which they believed and cast their cares upon Him.
- II. God is creator.
 - A. **Psalm 8** puts this in perspective. When we view God as creator, every day is a reminder of His amazing power. When I look at the rocks and trees, rivers and seas, and especially the moon and stars, I see a constant reminder of God's might. In that scenario, I can't help but recognize how small and dependent I am on Him. I can't help but turn to Him for help. He has that power.
 - B. **Psalm 139:13-16** puts another spin on this. If God is creator of the universe and all that is in it. He is my creator. He put me together. He knows me. Nothing of me is secret from Him. That can affect my praying in one of two ways. I'll either isolate from God ashamed to approach Him because He knows me too well. Or I can be set free to be honest with Him because He already knows everything about me and has asked me to pray anyway.

III. God is the source.

- A. He is the source of everything. The source of life (**Psalm 36:9**). The source of blessing (**Psalm 24:5**). The source of truth (**Psalm 43:3**). He is the source of every good thing. We accept this because of **James 1:17**.
- B. However, for the psalmist, since God is the sovereign ruler of the universe. He is not just the source of the good. He is the source of the bad as well. Illness (**Psalm 102:3-11**), enemies (**Psalm 13:2**), financial ruin (**Psalm 62:9-10**), struggles (**Psalm 88:3-7**); none of it would be there if God acted. For the psalmist, you can place all manner of free will choices, chance, sin, and Satan between the bad things that are happening and God. However, as sovereign ruler, God is the ultimate source of all these things as well. Sometimes they saw God as the source directly through retribution and punishment (**Psalm 6:1-3**). Sometimes they saw God as the source not because He was the direct cause, but because He simply ignored what was happening (**Psalm 13:1-2**). If He would act, the bad things would stop. Therefore, they saw Him as the source of all things.
- C. In fact, despite the connection we made in our last lesson about praying like the psalmists between the Hebrew psalms and the psalms of the surrounding cultures, this one point stands out in stark contrast. Hermann Gunkel notes:

A profound manner of thought stands alongside this immediate and apparently primitive manner of thought. It seeks connection between YHWH and the illness, which is very different from Babylonian prayer where illness and distress are generally traced back to evil demons and magicians. Even at this point one can see how Israelite religions sought to trace everything that happens in the world back to YHWH, and to understand everything in relationship to YHWH (Introduction to Psalms, Mercer University Press, Macon, GA, 1998, p 136).

- D. Initially, I rebel against this. I have become comfortable letting Satan be the source of the bad things that happen to us because I am afraid people might get mad at God. The psalmists would have none of that. God was the source. If that led to anger at God, then so be it. Take that anger to God and express it in psalms and prayers.
- E. There is a very important point behind this. Many of these psalms are complaints, either individually or communally. They lamented everything from illness to attack. But they took it all to God. Why? Because He's the source; He's the only one that can actually do anything about it.
- F. Perhaps we're making a mistake when we separate God from the bad that happens. I believe the psalmists would have thought so.

IV. God is judge.

- A. **Psalm 96** makes the connection; if God is creator, He is also judge. This makes perfect sense. He made the universe and all that is in it. He made us. Therefore, we are accountable to Him for how we behave.
- B. **Psalm 94** demonstrates why the psalmist, so often in dismay because of his enemies, could almost always come around in the end. He viewed God as judge. The psalmist knew, even if he didn't like God's timing, God would judge the wicked and the enemies. God is judge.
- C. Not only is God judge, He is the righteous judge who judges with equity (**Psalm 75:2**).

V. God is king.

- A. **Psalm 95:3** says, "the Lord is the great God, and a great King of all gods." Why pray to other gods? Even if they existed, YHWH is the King. Of course, the psalmist is absolute in his belief that YHWH alone is God (**Psalm 86:10**).
- B. If God is king of Gods, then He ought also to be our king (**Psalm 5:2; 84:3; 95:3; 145:1**). That is, He is our sovereign. Our ruler. He is not some mystical God and king of the heavens who has little to do with our lives. Rather, He is integrally connected with how we live every day. He is our king.

VI. God is my rock, fortress, mighty tower, etc.

- A. **Psalm 18** expresses it this way:

I love you, O LORD, my strength. / The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, / my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, / my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. / I

will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, / and I am saved from my enemies /...For who is God, but the LORD? / And who is a rock, except our God? /...The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, / and exalted be the God of my salvation...

- B. We can rely on God. We cannot rely on kings (**Psalm 48:4-5**). We cannot rely on armies or on personal strength (**Psalm 33:16**). We cannot rely on riches (**Psalm 62:9-10**). We cannot rely on family (**Psalm 27:10**). We cannot rely on friends (**Psalm 41:9**). But we can rely on God.
- C. When the psalmist says God is his rock, strength, fortress, tower, shield, salvation, redeemer and any other number of terms, he is talking about how he can trust God to see him through whatever he faces. This is amazing considering the number of laments and complaints. Yet, the psalmists prayed because they knew they could trust God to act on their behalf. Therefore, they surrendered to God. They would accept whatever came from His hand and simply continue to submit to Him. What else could they do? He was the only source of strength.
- D. We would do well to preach these psalms in this time of economic uncertainty. People need to hear God is the rock and the mighty tower. He can uphold us no matter what we face and He will deliver us in His time.

VII. God is shepherd.

- A. Obviously, **Psalm 23** comes to mind. But this is also mentioned in **Psalm 28:9** and **Psalm 80:1**.
- B. Being shepherd means God is our leader, our feeder, our protector, our comforter, our restorer. He is the provider of blessing. He is our livelihood. He is the reason we can keep going and keep living. Without Him, we die.

VIII. God is near.

- A. I know this sounds odd because the psalmists sometimes say God is far away or hiding (e.g. **Psalm 10:1; 13:1**). It appears the psalmists think God is far away.
- B. Actually, this is not what the psalmists believe or think. It is rather an expression of how they feel in moments of distress, but it is not what they believe when they think through the situation. Almost all laments end with praise and knowledge that God does hear and will act because He is near and He is listening (**Psalm 10:14; 13:5-6**).
- C. In other places, the psalmists directly express God's nearness (**Psalm 34:18; 119:151; 145:18**).
- D. However, the greatest testimony to their belief that God was near is that they kept praying. They kept writing psalms. Do we talk to those we know aren't listening and won't listen? Of course not. They knew God did hear, did see. He is near. Consider **Psalm 5:3; 11:4; 53:2; 94:9**.

IX. God is love.

- A. This is perhaps the greatest theme of all the psalms. More than any other aspect of the psalmists' belief in God, God's love kept them praying.
- B. God's steadfast love is mentioned 123 times in the psalms.
 - 1. God's steadfast love is precious (**Psalm 36:7**).
 - 2. We enter His house through His steadfast love (**Psalm 5:7**).
 - 3. He delivers us for the sake of His steadfast love (**Psalm 6:4**).
 - 4. He is merciful and forgets our sins because of His steadfast love (**Psalm 25:6-7**).
 - 5. His steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts Him (**Psalm 32:10**).
 - 6. His steadfast love endures all day (**Psalm 52:1**).
 - 7. God answers our pleas because of His steadfast love (**Psalm 69:16**).
 - 8. His steadfast love holds us up when we think we'll slip (**Psalm 94:18**).
 - 9. His steadfast love endures forever (**Psalm 100:5**).
- C. **Psalm 136** provides a crescendo about God's steadfast love, declaring it endures forever 26 times. This psalm was likely used as a form of liturgy in which an officiate among the priests would read the first half of the verse and the congregation would respond with the reminder "for his steadfast love endures forever."
- D. Whether they were angry, sad, distressed, harassed or happy, the psalmists agreed God loved them. Therefore they prayed. If we want to pray like they did, we have to know God loves us and His love endures no matter what. He will show His love. We must simply wait on Him.

Conclusion:

If we develop a faith in the God who is, who is creator, the source, the judge, the king, the rock and fortress, the shepherd and who is near and loves us, praying like the psalmists, praying with their conviction and determination will come naturally. When we develop faith in the God of the Psalmists, then we will not simply quote the psalms in prayer, rather our prayers will grow to be like the psalmists.

*To you O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God in you I trust;
let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.
Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!
Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.
For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great.
Who is the man who fears the LORD?
Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.
His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the land.
The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them his covenant.
My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for he will pluck my feet out of the net.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
bring me out of my distresses.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.
Consider how many are my foes,
and with what violent hatred they hate me.
Oh, guard my soul and deliver me!
Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.
Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all his troubles.*

--Psalm 25

While your prayers may not be hailed as great poetry and they may never end up in someone's prayer book, if you develop the gut-level faith in the Psalmists' God that they had, your prayers will develop the relationship with God that they had. Your prayers will cast you upon Him and He will see you through. Do you believe in the Psalmists' God?