

## Praying Like the Psalmists: Seeing Ourselves as the Psalmists Did

### Introduction:

Over and again, when people are in troubled times, they are advised to look to the **Psalms**. The prayers and songs we read comfort in all sorts of troubles because they were clearly offered during all kinds of circumstances. Many of us long to be able to pray as those psalmists did, freely carrying our cares, confessions, and praises to God naturally and continually. The greatness of the psalms, however, is not in the wording or the phrases, as beautiful as those may be. As we learned in our last lesson, the greatness of the psalmists' prayers comes from their relationship with God. When we view God as they did, we'll begin to pray as they did. However, there is another part of this relationship. That's us. If we want to pray as the psalmists did, we must see God properly, but we must also see ourselves as they did.

### Discussion:

- I. We are sheep in need of a shepherd.
  - A. Perhaps the greatest summary of how the psalmists viewed themselves is found in **Psalm 23**. We are sheep in need of a shepherd. The picture of **Psalm 23** is pleasant to our ears. Even when we preach it, we talk about what a wonderful picture this was to David, a shepherd. He thinks of the wonderful relationship between him and his sheep and speaks of it between our God and us. No doubt, that relationship is beautiful.
  - B. However, while the picture of God as the loving Shepherd is a great comfort to us, the picture of sheep is not a flattering description of us. Sheep are helpless, powerless, hopeless. They easily become cast down, that is, rolled over and unable to even get back on their own feet. They have no natural defenses. They are easy prey. Even with a shepherd, they constantly wander off and go astray. If left to themselves, they destroy their own feeding grounds and die.
  - C. We love to talk about **Psalm 23**. But few of us really view ourselves as sheep. Most often, we view ourselves as powerful people who can accomplish just about anything we want to. We can lead ourselves. We can be righteous enough to go to heaven. We are strong and mighty. Oh, surely, we aren't perfect. Certainly we need God to give us that little nudge to go the last little bit. But sheep? Helpless, hopeless, powerless? No. That's not us. If we just try a little harder, we'll make it. Oddly, enough, like the sheep, we try harder and only succeed in wearing ourselves out, exhausting ourselves, and destroying ourselves with the effort.
  - D. The psalmists saw themselves like the sheep. And not just because of this psalm.
    1. We are helpless (**Psalm 70:5**).
    2. We are powerless (**Psalm 88:4**).
    3. We are hopeless (**Psalm 33:16-19**).
    4. We easily become cast down (**Psalm 42:5-11**).
    5. We have no natural defenses (**Psalm 141:8**).
    6. We are easy prey (**Psalm 124**).
    7. We readily go astray (**Psalm 119:67, 176**).
    8. Left to ourselves, we will die (**Psalm 141**).
  - E. Because we are sheep, how can we help but come into God's presence humbly, honestly, sincerely? How can we help but pray? Yet, if we see ourselves as strong, we will always fall short. A great contrast can be seen in **Psalm 5** between those who see what they truly are and those who think they are somehow smarter than God.
    1. **Psalm 5:1-3**—The righteous come to God humbly, groaning before God accompanied with sacrifice. The righteous know they need mercy to come into God's presence.
    2. **Psalm 5:4-6**—The wicked, however, boast and lie. They see themselves as strong. They don't need God. They will rely on themselves.
    3. **Psalm 5:7-8**—The righteous humble themselves before God, bowing down in fear.
    4. **Psalm 5:9-10**—The wicked have no truth in their mouth, only death. They do not honor; they only flatter.
    5. **Psalm 5:11-12**—The righteous take refuge in God. They know God is their strength, their power, their protection. Therefore they rejoice.

F. When we see ourselves as sheep in need of a shepherd, praying like the psalmists becomes so much more natural.

II. We are sinners in need of mercy.

A. We can turn to passages like **Psalm 38:18** to see the psalmist confess sins. However, the psalmists didn't simply see themselves as folks who sinned on occasion that needed little help. Rather, the psalmist was covered up with sin (**Psalm 38:3-4**). Their sins were not just a spot on their record, they were a flood in which they were drowning. They needed mercy. They needed saving. God was the only who could provide that.

B. Paul certainly learned man is sinful from the psalms. Consider his argument in **Romans 3:10-18**. Five of the six quotes in his list come from the psalms.

1. "None is righteous, no, not one; / no one understands; / no one seeks for God. / All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; / no one does good, / not even one." From **Psalm 14:1-3**.
2. "Their throat is an open grave; / they use their tongues to deceive." From **Psalm 5:9**.
3. "The venom of asps is under their lips." From **Psalm 140:3**.
4. "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." From **Psalm 10:7**.
5. "Their feet are swift to shed blood; / in their paths are ruin and misery, / and the way of peace they have not known." The one statement not in the psalms is from **Isaiah 59:7-8**.
6. "There is no fear of God before their eyes." From **Psalm 36:1**.

C. At times, according to the psalmists, our sins are the reason for our suffering. Consider **Psalm 31:9-10; 32:3-5; 38:3-4, 17-20**. When the psalmist knew his sins were the cause of his suffering, he still prayed for mercy. But he did so with penitence. As **Psalm 38:18-20** said, he was begging for mercy as he confessed and turned from his iniquity. As **Psalm 66:18** explained, the psalmist knew he couldn't simply regard sin in his heart and ask for mercy. God would not listen in that case.

D. The part about the sinfulness of the psalmists at which we are most likely to rebel is the psalmists viewed themselves as so sinful, that they could not overcome sin apart from God. They would never quit sinning by their own power. Many of us are willing to say we cannot be forgiven apart from God, but we will be victorious over our sins by our own strength and choice. The psalmists saw this as a losing battle. Apart from God's grace and working in their lives, they would not stop sinning and therefore would not be forgiven.

1. Consider some statements from the psalms.

- a. **Psalm 5:7-8**—To be righteous, the psalmist must be led by God. God must make His ways straight for the psalmist. And the psalmist can only enter God's house by God's steadfast love.
- b. **Psalm 23**—Again, we are the sheep. Left to ourselves, we wander off, go astray, become cast down and die. We are saved by the leadership of the Shepherd who guides in righteous paths.
- c. **Psalm 25:4-10**—To be righteous, the psalmist must be led by God. He must be instructed by God.
- d. **Psalm 26:12**—Despite the psalmist's extravagant claims of personal innocence and walking in integrity, the last line is telling. Why has he been able to do this? Because his foot stands on level ground. Considering **Psalm 143:10** the psalmist walks on level ground because of the Spirit's guidance.
- e. **Psalm 39:1-2**—Despite the psalmist's best intention to guard his ways by himself and not sin, his distress grew. Therefore he cried out for God to act so He might be delivered from his transgressions (**Psalm 39:8**).
- f. **Psalm 51:5**—So great was the psalmist's sins he presented himself as being conceived in it.
- g. **Psalm 141:3-10**—This psalmist is asking God to do whatever it takes to keep him out of sin. Even though his prayer is continually against the evil deeds of others, he sees sin as a trap into which he will inevitably fall unless God does something to keep him out.

2. This shocks us; we fear accepting this point because we believe it may teach the Calvinistic ideas of total depravity and irresistible grace. The difference, however, is this; in Calvinism,

each person wills to repent only if God chose them to; those who don't have a will unto repentance do not because God has not chosen them to. The psalmists have chosen to will penitence, they volunteer freely (cf. **Psalms 110:3**). The psalmists' conception of overcoming even though they are unable to is not that God must select them unconditionally to will for salvation. Rather, they must choose to surrender completely to God because only God can save them; they cannot save themselves. They surrender by giving their will up to His, trusting His word, following His lead.

3. No doubt, this seems to be a paradox. However, it is the same paradox we find in **Romans 7:14-25**; **Ephesians 3:14-21**; and **Philippians 2:12-13**. It is summed up by the maxim I've heard attributed to Augustine of Hippo, "Without God, I cannot; without me, God will not."
- E. When I am able to see my sins as a sea in which I'm drowning, then I'll pray as the psalmists did. When I see the only possible way for me to overcome sin, not just forgiveness but actual victory, is by God's grace, I'll pray as the psalmists did.

### III. Sometimes we are innocent.

- A. Though our first two points cover the main concepts of the psalmists' idea about self, leading them to pray. There was one very interesting point I found repeated. In some of the laments, the psalmists did not claim guilt and beg for mercy. Rather, like Job, at times they declared their innocence and begged for deliverance and retribution.
- B. Consider some examples:
  1. **Psalms 7:3-5**—"O LORD my God, if I have done this, / if there is wrong in my hands...let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it, / and let him trample my life to the ground / and lay my glory in the dust."
  2. **Psalms 26:4-7**—"I do not sit with men of falsehood, / nor do I consort with hypocrites. / I hate the assembly of evildoers, / and I will not sit with the wicked. / I wash my hands in innocence/and go around your altar, O LORD..."
  3. **Psalms 35:7, 12-14**—"For without cause they hid their net for me; / without cause they dug a pit for my life...They repay me evil for good; / my soul is bereft. / But I, when they were sick— / I wore sackcloth; / I afflicted myself with fasting; / I prayed with head bowed on my chest..."
  4. **Psalms 59:3-4**—"For behold, they lie in wait for my life; / fierce men stir up strife against me. / For no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD, / for no fault of mine, they run and make ready."
  5. **Psalms 71:6, 17-18**—"Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; / you are he who took me from my mother's womb...O God, from my youth you have taught me, / and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. / So even to old age and gray hairs, / O God, do not forsake me, / until I proclaim your might to another generation..." (contrast this with **Psalms 51:5** above).
  6. **Psalms 86:2**—"Preserve my life, for I am godly..."
  7. **Psalms 109:4-5**—"In return for my love they accuse me, / but I give myself to prayer. / So they reward me evil for good, / and hatred for love."
- C. There is a time for declaring we don't deserve what is happening to us.
  1. I recognize some of these statements are in specific contexts. For instance, **Psalms 7:3-5** is not a declaration of absolute innocence, but a declaration that he hadn't done what has been said of him.
  2. Also, I recognize we can say along with the psalmist, "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand?" (**Psalms 130:3**). Clearly, the psalmists did believe everyone has sinned and God has the right to send punishment and discipline upon everyone.
  3. However, the reason I bring this up is not to say some people are utterly innocent. Rather, there is a place for declaring we don't deserve something happening to us. Too often, we play the part of Job's friends when someone is suffering. They declare they haven't done something worthy of their suffering and we respond, "Oh, we all sin. Really, the question is not whether we've done something worthy of suffering, but whether we've done anything worthy of having peace and safety." The psalmists would not necessarily say this.

4. While they recognized retribution occurred in many cases, they did leave room for saying some turmoil is undeserved. I'm not sure where to draw the lines on this. I simply noticed it was the case.

**Conclusion:**

If we want our prayers to sing like those of the Psalmists, the first place we need to start is with our relationship with God. We need to get to know Him and see Him as the psalmists did. But at the same time, we need to get to know us, cutting through the lies, pride, and arrogance we so often hide behind. We need to see that we are sheep in need of a shepherd, sinners in need of a savior. When we do we'll pray like the psalmists did.