

## Praying Like the Psalmists: Preparing to Pray as They Did

### Introduction:

An American evangelist was traveling through South Africa with a local preacher. As you may know, cars in South Africa are not always very reliable and theirs broke down between villages in the Serengeti. The two men decided they could walk and only be an hour late to their meeting and still have time to teach the villagers. As the American preacher started to walk away, the local preacher pulled out his duffel bag and started to put on some tennis shoes. The American was surprised since the man had been wearing hiking boots. "Why are you putting on those shoes brother?" "This is in case a lion attacks. It will be easier to run." The American laughed, "Lions...are you serious?" "Absolutely," was the reply. "Now brother," the American said, "if a lion attacks, you won't be able to outrun it." The local preacher glanced at the American's casual dress shoes and said, "Brother, if a lion attacks, I won't have to outrun it. I'll only have to outrun you."

Isn't that the way of a lion? When hunting, it doesn't seek out the fastest zebra in the pack. It doesn't go for the strongest buffalo in the herd. It doesn't search for the largest antelope in the group. It preys on the weakest, the slowest, the easiest. **1 Peter 5:8** reminds us our adversary is a lion seeking to devour us. He is not different than the actual lion. He is looking for our vulnerabilities and when he finds them, he'll attack. That is why what **Ephesians 6:10-13** says is so important. We are the weak ones. If Satan attacks us, we cannot possibly withstand. However, God is too strong for him. On our own, we can't win the fight. However, when we are standing in the Lord's might, we have a strength Satan cannot assail no matter how hard he tries. Therefore, Paul encouraged us to put on the Lord's armor. As he concluded the armor he added one often overlooked part of our battle. He said we must be "praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication" (**Ephesians 6:18**). Prayer is the means by which we connect to God so we can win the battle. Therefore, we've been taking a special look at prayer this year. We've been looking at the **Psalms** to learn from those masterful pray-ers how to pray as they did. We've noticed their view of God, their thoughts about themselves, and even how they saw prayer. Now we need to recognize that for the psalmists, prayer wasn't something done in a vacuum. Rather, the psalmists saw prayer as something they had to prepare for. They didn't believe just anyone could pray just whenever they wanted. Let's examine what preparation the psalmists believed went along with being able to pray.

### Discussion:

- I. The psalmists prepared to pray by studying God's word.
  - A. **Psalm 1** stands as an introduction or preface to the entire psalter. Before anyone reading the **Psalms** even gets to see a prayer, he learns, "Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the law of the LORD,/and on his law he meditates day and night."
  - B. In **Psalm 40:8**, the psalmist explains one reason God listened to His praying was because "your law is within my heart."
  - C. **Psalm 19:7-11** and all of **Psalm 119** stand as huge testimonies regarding the psalmists' relationship to God's word. God's word was more desirable than honey and gold. Given the choice between God's word and money, the psalmist chose God's word.
  - D. **Isaiah 66:3-4** drives this point home. How can we possibly expect God to listen to our word, if we refuse to listen to His.
  - E. This relationship to God's word laid the foundation for coming to God in prayer.
- II. The psalmists prepared to pray by living God's word.
  - A. The psalmists were not Gnostics believing as long as they knew God's word they could live how they wanted. Rather, they recognized that if they gave themselves over to sin, God would not listen.
    1. **Psalm 26:1**—"Vindicate me, O LORD,/for I have walked in my integrity,/and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering."
    2. **Psalm 66:18**—"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,/the Lord would not have listened."

- B. Don't misunderstand; the psalmists recognized the prayer of confession (cf. **Psalm 51**). They recognized the place for the disobedient to come and lay their sins out before God and seek forgiveness.
  - C. Nor did they take this to mean only the absolutely sinless could pray. They did not believe we could earn the right to pray by our personal holiness and righteousness (**Psalm 130:3**). We would all fail if that were the standard. They would not examine their day and say, "Oh no, I sinned today, I can't pray."
  - D. Rather, the psalmists understood that they could not sin with impunity and think their prayers accomplished anything. They understood that they could not walk their own path and expect God to come into step with them. They understood that if they discarded God's will for their lives, their prayers would accomplish nothing.
- III. The psalmists prepared to pray by having a broken and contrite heart.
- A. While the psalmists saw the need to live by God's word, they recognized they had failed to do that. In a moment, we'll learn something about sacrifice and prayer, but for now we need to see that the psalmists did not simply think killing an animal fixed everything, giving them the right to pray. **Psalm 51:17** declares the insufficiency of animal sacrifices, claiming the sacrifice God truly wants from us is a broken and contrite heart. If our hearts are not broken, the breaking of an animal's neck does us no good.
  - B. **Psalm 51:1-12** demonstrates the outpouring of such a broken heart, admitting the horrendous nature of its sin and recognizing it can turn nowhere but to the Lord. **Psalm 32** is another demonstration of such brokenness.
  - C. We need to see this in its proper place. The issue is not really that we need to check "broken and contrite heart" off our list of things to do in order to pray right or God won't listen to us. The real point is without a broken and contrite heart we won't pray consistently or properly. The proud will not pray. They do not recognize their need for God and, therefore, they do not recognize their need for prayer.
- IV. The psalmists prepared to pray by surrendering to God.
- A. This ties in to the point about the psalmists' belief that God was their rock, their fortress, their strong and mighty tower (cf. **Psalm 18:1-3**). We do not need to develop that any further.
  - B. I bring it up because this absolute trust was in place before the psalmists prayed. Because the Lord was their rock, etc., they prayed. They trusted God, so they prayed. More than trusting God, they surrendered to Him. They saw their lives as in His hand.
  - C. **Psalm 31:5** provides the picture, "Into your hand I commit my spirit." That is, "I trust you. I'm just going to do what you say, follow where you lead, go where you guide. I expect You to protect me by that surrender."
  - D. If we wish to pray like the psalmists did, we must have this same sense of surrender. I cannot emphasize it enough. Prayer is only useful for those who are willing to give themselves completely and whole-heartedly to the Lord (**Psalm 119:2, 10**).
  - E. Again, this is not an issue of getting all our prayer ducks in a row to convince God to listen to us. The fact is if we do not surrender our lives to God, we won't pray. Oh, sure we may bring to him the really big things that have us totally flummoxed. But we won't pray consistently.
- V. The psalmists prepared to pray by offering sacrifice
- A. As stated earlier, the psalmists tied sacrifice to prayer. While the other points we have discussed are all truly important, it is this one that makes prayer effective for us.
    1. **Psalm 5:3**—"O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;/in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch." (This is offering a sacrifice to have access in prayer.)
    2. **Psalm 54:6**—"With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;/I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good." (This is a promise to sacrifice when God responds to the prayer.)
    3. **Psalm 66:13-15**—"I will come into your house with burnt offerings;/I will perform my vows to you,/that which my lips uttered/and my mouth promised when I was in trouble./I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,/with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;/I will make an offering of bulls and goats." (This is the fulfillment of sacrifices promised while praying.)

- B. These few psalms demonstrate what the Old Testament had already established by revealing the practice of God's people.
1. In **Genesis 12:8**, Abraham built an altar and called on the name of the Lord.
  2. In **Genesis 13:1-4**, Abraham had traveled to Egypt because of the famine. When he returned to Canaan, he went to the altar he had previously built in order to call on the Lord.
  3. In **Genesis 13:18**, Abraham moved to Mamre and built another altar in order to call on the name of the Lord.
  4. In **Genesis 26:25**, Isaac followed Abraham's example and built an altar in Beersheba in order to call on the name of the Lord.
  5. In **Genesis 33:20**, Jacob built an altar in Shechem. In the **Genesis** context of altars, this was presumably to call on the name of the Lord as his fathers did.
  6. In **I Chronicles 21:26**, David built an altar to call on the name of the Lord to seek relief from the judgment over the unlawful census.
  7. In **Isaiah 56:7**, God said there would be altars and sacrifice at His temple because His house would be a house of prayer.
- C. Why was prayer tied to the sacrificial altar? Because, as said above we prepare for prayer by living God's word. But we've botched that. We've failed at keeping God's laws for us. **Isaiah 59:1-2** demonstrates the consequences of this failure by explaining that our sins separate us from God so He does not listen. Something must atone for and remove sin if we want to pray.
- D. Here is the all-important point for us. According to **Numbers 28-29**, God's servants in the Old Testament offered more than 1200 sacrifices a year not counting all the personal sacrifices to atone for their sins. Yet, **Hebrews 10:1** shows those sacrifices actually didn't work. Something needed to be done with those sins anyway. That is why the statement of John the Baptist in **John 1:29** is so important. As he saw Jesus, he proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"
- E. The Old Testament prepares us to see that without sacrifice, we cannot come to the presence of God and lay out our petitions before Him. Even if we have a broken and contrite heart, our sins still separate us from God. We are guilty and unworthy to come into His holy presence. But sacrifice bridges that gap. Sacrifice is what cleanses us and allows us into God's presence. However, animal sacrifice doesn't really do the trick. God had a plan all along that those sacrifices were pointing to. That plan is Jesus Christ. He was the Lamb through whose sacrifice we are able to come into God's presence and pray. As **Hebrews 10:19-22** demonstrates, we enter the holy places by His blood. Do you see what this means? Prayer is not for everyone. Prayer is the privilege of God's child, forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Prayer does not save. Prayer is for the saved.
- F. If you want to be able to pray, you need to prepare. Yes, you need to study your Bible. Yes, you need to strive to obey God's will. Yes, you must have a broken and contrite heart. Yes, you must put your trust in God. But none of that is worth one whit if you aren't in Jesus Christ. This, of course, forces us to ask—are you in Jesus? Have you been baptized into His sacrificial death (cf. **Romans 6:3**)? If not, despite all the emotional comfort your praying may be doing for you, it is not connecting you to God.

### Conclusion:

Prayer is not an activity in a vacuum. It is not just something anyone, anywhere, at anytime can do. No, we must prepare for prayer. But we do not prepare for it by putting on certain clothes, arranging our Bibles a certain way, getting out prayer effects like rugs and rosaries. No, we prepare by entering Jesus Christ and surrendering ourselves to His will. Are you prepared to pray?