

Praying Like the Psalmists, Part 1

Why We Don't Have to Pray Like the Psalmists

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Introduction:

“The only way to understand the psalms is on your knees, the whole congregation praying the words of the psalms with all its strength”—Deitrich Bonhoeffer.¹ Though the **Psalms** are Old Testament canon, part of us feels exactly as Bonhoeffer did. They are to be prayed, or at least sung. Our modern hymnals demonstrate we feel this way. Many of our songs refer to, quote, or are based on the **Psalms**.

- o “Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah!,” “Praise the Lord”—**Psalm 148**
- o “The Lord’s My Shepherd,” “The Lord My Shepherd Is,” “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want”—**Psalm 23**
- o “How Shall the Young Secure”—**Psalm 119**
- o “As the Deer”—**Psalm 42**
- o “This is the Day”—**Psalm 118**
- o “I Will Sing of the Mercies of the Lord”—**Psalm 89**
- o “You Are My Strength,” “I Will Call Upon the Lord”—**Psalm 18**
- o “Unto Thee O Lord”—**Psalm 25**
- o “How Majestic Is Your Name”—**Psalm 8**

Over the next several months, I plan to take about one lesson per month and help us study how to pray as the psalmists did. I hope we’ll all grow spiritually by this endeavor, we’ll draw closer to God, and stronger in prayer. However, today we are going to begin in what will seem like a very odd place. Over the coming months, I hope to show you how we can pray with greater faith, greater creativity, and greater honesty by considering how the psalmists prayed. However, at first, I want to set some of our fears to rest.

How many of you would like to pray more like the psalmists? On the other hand, as you hear that, how many of you feel overwhelmed by the thought of trying to pray like the psalmists? The psalms are so extensive, we are overwhelmed at the thought of trying to learn from them how to pray. They psalmists use language with which we are unfamiliar. They address feelings we would rather keep hidden. Though they enliven our hearts when we hear them, they sound fake and tinny on our tongues. Not to mention, some of them sound almost blasphemous. Thus, we reach a paradox. We want to pray and sing like the psalmists, but then again, we don’t.

Therefore, in this lesson, as we begin our in depth study, I want to ease some of those fears and talk about why we do not have to pray and sing exactly like the psalmists. As I said, I know that sounds like an odd place to begin. However, I hope it will lay some of our fears to rest and set us free to simply study the aspects of the psalms that really can help us.

Discussion:

- I. The **Psalms** are part of the Old Covenant.
 - A. For all we can learn from Psalms, we must remember it is not part of our covenant. **John 10:24** demonstrates the Psalms are part of the Old Law. As **Hebrews 7:12** explains, the law has changed. Psalms is not our law.
 - B. Jesus was the goal and end of the Psalms as He was for the rest of the Law (cf. **Romans 10:4**). We are not striving to measure up to the Psalms in our prayer lives so we can be righteous enough to go to heaven.
 - C. Therefore, we must take care. As we can learn from all of the Old Testament (cf. **Romans 15:4**), we can learn from **Psalms**. However, we must distinguish between learning universal lessons of prayer, praise and worship and co-opting aspects of the Old Testament pattern and bringing them into the New. At the same time, we must be careful that we are making the distinction based on biblical principles and not based on our preferences or traditions.
- II. The **Psalms** were written in culturally appropriate form.
 - A. The **Psalms** were not written as a guidebook for universal prayer for all cultures of all times. Old Covenant Hebrews wrote it for Old Covenant Hebrews.
 - B. As God did with all scripture, He used the men within their culture, with their backgrounds to write out His revelation. To act like we must pray exactly as the psalmists did would be similar to saying we can only preach about judgment the way those who wrote in the apocalyptic style did.

¹ My Soul Finds Rest, Edwin Robertson trans. and ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2002, p. 11.

- C. Claus Westermann and Hermann Gunkel, respected scholars on the psalms, both point out that the genre of Psalms is not merely a biblical genre. Rather, the Hebrew psalms are written in the same style and genre as the psalms of Egypt and Babylon. The specific style and genre was not meant to be a mandated style for all prayer. Rather it was God’s revelation through man within his culture.
- D. Therefore, we need to keep in mind cultural differences. In some cases, our sensibilities are bruised by the direct and almost commanding nature of the psalms in their address to God, without so much as a “please.” Consider **Psalm 102:1-2**: “Hear my prayer, O Lord;/let my cry come to you!/Do not hide your face from me/in the day of my distress/Incline your ear to me;/answer me speedily in the day when I call!” (ESV). In our culture, this is rude and demanding. In the ancient near eastern culture, this was clearly an accepted mode of address. Perhaps such statements in our prayers are lawful. At the same time, I suggest we keep the cultural differences in mind. Just as we wouldn’t encourage modern Christians to call their mother, “Woman,” just because Jesus did in **John 19:26**, we should perhaps be careful encouraging modern Christians to command God to wake up and listen.
- E. We do not have to use the same cultural images and metaphors the psalmists did. We do not have to use the same cultural forms. Though we can learn from their hymns, laments and thanksgivings, we do not have to mirror their form exactly.

III. When Jesus taught how to pray, He didn’t reference **Psalms**.

- A. As much as I like the **Psalms**, as much as I feel the pull to pray like them, and as much as I will encourage you to pray the Psalms, I can’t help but notice Jesus was asked by His disciples to teach them to pray (**Luke 11:1**).
- B. Jesus provided a model for prayer and gave instruction on prayer (**Luke 11:1-13**), yet did not once refer the disciples to Psalms.
- C. Having said that, Jesus did use the Psalms in His own praying (cf. **Matthew 27:46; Luke 23:46**). Thus, even though Jesus did not refer His apostles to them, His own praying demonstrates the **Psalms** are beneficial to our praying.

IV. The Hebrews didn’t pray like the **Psalms** either.

- A. Just like none of us really believes Job and his friends talked in epic poetry, we should not believe the Hebrews prayed in the form of psalms. The **Psalms** is a collection of stylized poems. They were not records of the way Old Testament saints naturally prayed.
- B. Consider the example of Hezekiah in **Isaiah 38:2-3, 9-20**.
 1. In **vss. 2-3** we see his prayer. It was very simple, prosaic and straightforward, much like our modern prayers, “Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight” (ESV).
 2. However in **vss. 10-20** we read a psalm complete with the stylized account of Hezekiah’s sickness, lament, plea and praise. Notice **vs. 9**: “A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness” (ESV).
 3. Hezekiah prayed as we do. Later, he wrote this psalm. Could we examine the actual origins of the individual psalms, I have no doubt we would find this to be the case for many of them. They are stylized accounts of previous prayers using the cultural form of memorializing those prayers.
- C. Having said that, I do recognize that, like Jesus on the cross, Old Testament saints would certainly have quoted these psalms and perhaps prayed them in their entirety. Some, like **Psalm 24**, were probably used liturgically for certain ceremonies and therefore recited as prayers. I’m simply pointing out the Jews did not pray in poem. We don’t have to either. Though, I believe the **Psalms** demonstrate we are free to write our own stylized prayers if wish.

Conclusion:

Though we can and will learn a great deal to benefit our prayers lives from the **Psalms**, we can relax as we approach them. They are not our law or our standard for prayer. We do not have to feel ashamed if our prayers do not soar to the poetic heights the psalms do.