

Praying Like the Psalmists: Be Rigorously Honest and Candid

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Introduction:

Imagine being in the middle of a congregational assembly, but instead of listening to the sermon, you are preparing to be led in prayer. The brother leading the prayer walks haltingly to the lectern. His hair is disheveled. His clothes rumpled. His shoulders are slumped. His face is blotched and mottled white and red. His eyes swollen. His cheeks are damp. He grasps the podium as if it the only thing that is keeping him from collapsing on the spot. He bows his head and says:

God, you are my Savior, so I'm praying to you now like I've been praying to you night and day. Please, listen to me. I am really struggling. I can't take it anymore. I feel like I might as well die because You aren't taking any notice of me anymore. You have made my life like darkness. You must be angry with me because You are lashing out at me like the repeated lashing of the ocean waves. My friends don't like me anymore and that is Your fault. I've cried so much over this I can hardly see. I've been praying to You for years and You haven't done anything. Am I going to die? Will You do anything for me then? Will I be any good to You then? Every morning I've been praying to You and get nothing? Why have You thrown me away? I'm absolutely powerless and helpless. I've been like this since I was young because of your terrors. Your attacks have destroyed me. They are always against me. They are closing in on me. And You have taken away my friends.

Without even closing off the prayer, the brother staggers from the lectern and sits back in his seat. What would you think? How would you feel? What would you think of such a prayer? What would you think of such a man? Would someone rush to the lectern to offer a proper prayer? Would you expect an elder to get up and make an apology to the brethren and to the visitors? Would you edge away from the brother expecting lightening to fall out of the sky and consume him?

What if I told you that a brother did offer this prayer? What if I told you this is actually a prayer recorded in scripture? What if I told you this is actually a prayer recorded as inspired scripture? Read **Psalm 88**. Heman the Ezrahite offered this prayer and God used it as Scripture. Which brings me to what I consider the greatest of the lessons we can learn about prayer from the psalmists. We've been studying the psalms as a guide to prayer for some time. I've built the lessons in what I thought was foundational importance, but this is the greatest lesson I've learned about prayer from the psalms. If we want to pray like the psalmists we must learn to pray honestly and candidly.

I'd like to share with you what some authors have said about the psalms:

I have chosen the words *candor* and *candid* quite deliberately. I might have used the word *honest*, but I have a specific image in mind...

The book of Psalms is full of candid pictures. It seems never to give us a posed shot. Instead, the psalms show us the writer just as he or she felt at a particular moment. This is one of the loveliest gifts of the book of Psalms. The Bible has preserved for us pictures of saints in some of their least saintly moments. If I had written some of the psalms, I would have left behind a request: "Please destroy this after I'm gone." But the Scriptures have saved these pictures. We are privileged to see the spiritual giants who wrote the psalms, not in portraits of their spiritual finery, but in the rags of their candid struggles (J. Ellsworth Kalas, Longing to Pray: How the Psalms Teach Us to Talk to God, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006, p 18).

Note that the Psalms thus propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much human speech and conduct which is in fact a cover-up. In most arenas where people live, we are expected and required to speak the language of safe orientation and equilibrium, either to find it so or to pretend we find it so. For the normal, conventional functioning of public life, the raw edges of disorientation and reorientation must be denied or suppressed for purposes of public equilibrium. As a result, our speech is dulled and mundane. Our passion has been stilled and is without imagination. And mostly the Holy One is not addressed, not because we dare not, but because God is far away and hardly seems important. This means that the agenda and intention of the Psalms is considerably at odds with the normal speech of most people, the normal speech of a stable, functioning, self-deceptive culture in which every thing must be kept running young and smooth.

Against that, the speech of the Psalms is abrasive, revolutionary, and dangerous. It announces that life is not like that, that our common experience is not one of well-being and equilibrium, but a churning, disruptive experience of dislocation and relocation. Perhaps in our conventional, routinized prayer life (e.g., the daily practice of the office) that is one of the reasons the Psalter does not yield its power—because out of habit or fatigue or numbness, we try to use the Psalms in our equilibrium. And when we do that, we miss the point of the Psalms. Moreover, our own experience may be left untapped and inarticulate and therefore not liberated. Such surface use of the Psalms coincides with the denial of the discontinuities in our own experience. Ernest Becker has written of *The Denial of Death*. But such denial happens not just at the crisis points. It happens daily in the reduction of language to numb conventions.

Thus I suggest that most of the Psalms can only be appropriately prayed by people who are living at the edge of their lives, sensitive to raw hurts, the primitive passions, and the naïve elations that are at the bottom of our life. For most of us, liturgical or devotional entry into the Psalms requires a real change of pace. It asks us to depart from our closely managed world of public survival, to move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy One (Walter Brueggemann, Praying the Psalms, St. Mary's Press, Winona, MN, 1982, pp 19-20).

If we want to pray like the psalmists, we must learn to be honest, candid, open, transparent. We must quit trying to provide a pretense of equilibrium and stability. We must quit trying to hide what is really in our hearts. We must quit trying to cover-up and compose. We must simply connect with God from where we really are. To me, this is a shocking lesson from the psalms, but it is the most important one if we really want to connect with God and if we really want the healing He has to offer us.

Discussion:

- I. We are allowed to feel.
 - A. What I have read and studied claims there are eight core emotions. There are certainly a myriad of terms we can use to describe feelings, but they can all be connected to these eight core emotions: Gladness, Sadness, Hurt, Loneliness, Anger, Fear, Guilt, and Shame.
 - B. If you're like me, your default thought is the only lawful emotion is gladness. After all, even when we go through various trials, we are supposed to count it all joy (**James 1:2-4**). We are supposed to rejoice in our sufferings (**Romans 5:3**). We're supposed to let our requests be made known with thanksgiving and not have any anxiety (**Philippians 4:6**). We might see a small exception for sadness sometimes because we are supposed to weep with those who weep (**Romans 12:15**). But all these other emotions demonstrate weakness. We're not really spiritual if we get angry, feel lonely, or live with hurt. Certainly, we feel guilt and shame sometimes, but those are obviously bad because we have to sin to feel those things.
 - C. When we are talking to each other, don't we often cover-up these other emotions? "How are you doing today?" "I'm fine." I've heard Christians brag that they always tell people, "I'm great." "I couldn't be better." Or if you're really spiritual, "I'm just blessed." When is the last time you asked somebody, "How are you doing today?" and they said, "I'm really pretty sad, because my wife hurt me emotionally this morning with something she said. That makes me feel lonely like I can't confide in or connect to anyone. But at the same time I feel some guilt because I know she was just responding to something I said because I was angry that she was running late." Pretty quickly we're thinking that is just too much information. You're supposed to say, "I'm fine" and let me move on to the next person. We're not really supposed to feel and we're definitely not suppose to share those feelings.
 - D. Consider **Psalm 88** again. That psalm conveys some feelings. I see sadness, anger, loneliness, and hurt in that psalm. God didn't consider those unspiritual. He didn't say that this psalm was the example of how not to live or pray. This is a psalm in a book of prayers that people would use as they needed them. We are allowed to feel all of our human emotions. Our brethren who wrote the psalms understood that.
- II. Be candid as you talk to God about your feelings.
 - A. The psalmists brought all their feelings to God. We mentioned the eight core emotions and we find examples of all of them in the psalms.
 1. *Gladness*: "Therefore my heart will be glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corrup-

- tion. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (**Psalm 16:9-11**).
2. *Sadness*: “My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me” (**Psalm 38:5-10**).
 3. *Hurt*: “Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft. But I, when they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting...as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning” (**Psalm 35:11-14**).
 4. *Loneliness*: “O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?...You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness” (**Psalm 88:14, 18**).
 5. *Anger*: “Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, ‘Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!’ O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (**Psalm 137:7-9**).
 6. *Fear*: “My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me and horror overwhelms me” (**Psalm 55:4-5**).
 7. *Guilt*: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (**Psalm 32:3-5**).
 8. *Shame*: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (**Psalm 51:3-5**).
- B. The entire gambit of emotions are expressed in the psalms. Instead of trying to cover up the feelings we have, we need to express them. We must get rid of this idea that the only emotion we can express to God is joy. Paul’s command in **Philippians 4:6** is not for us to get our emotions under control and then take our request to God. Rather, it is that we deal with our emotions by taking them to God in prayer.
- C. I think many Christians feel as I do. How else can we explain the lack of laments in our hymnals? Perhaps you know some I do not. The closest thing to a lament I can recall in our songbooks is “Farther Along,” but we spend most of our time arguing over whether that song is scriptural. Interestingly, when I went through our hymnals, I found 42 songs that referred to, quoted or were based on the **Psalms**. Only one was from a lament. Interestingly, that is “As the Deer.” That is surprising because that song is not presented as a lament. In fact, it doesn’t reference the lamenting portions. It doesn’t quote the parts that talk about our cast down soul and how we feel far from God and that is why the psalmist was panting for God.
- D. No doubt there are numerous times we feel the praises we sing. Yet, to be honest, after studying the psalms and considering my own experience I fear we sometimes use those good feeling songs to medicate and cover up what we really feel instead of having some good psalms that express our sadness, our anger, our loneliness, our hurt so we can work through them. We even specifically state this some times. “Oh, I felt terrible, but now that I’ve come to church, I feel better.” Sadly, I’ve known too many that go home and just go back to feeling terribly. That, I think, is why so many churches keep looking for newer and better highs in their assemblies. They aren’t really dealing with those emotions by being honest to God with them. They are just covering them up with clichéd phrases and emotional experiences.
- E. The psalmists, however, didn’t cover up their feelings. They brought them directly to God. They didn’t overcome anxiety by trying to shut it off and pray instead. They shut it off by admitting their anxieties to the Lord. They didn’t count their trials all joy by simply deciding to just be happy no matter what bad things happened to them. They attained happiness by sharing their

bitterness, sadness and rage with God, working through it in prayer so they could come to joy in the end.

III. Hang on to your faith.

- A. I know my biggest fear with all this radical honesty and candor is that it seems like a demonstration of doubt rather than faith. However, the amazing thing about the psalmists is that they hung on to their faith. In fact, it appears that the reason they could be honest with their feelings is because of their faith. In most cases, even these despairing cries ended in faith.
 1. While they began with saying God was far away (**Psalm 10:1**), they almost always ended with admitting God was actually near and listening (**Psalm 10:14**).
 2. While they began by saying they felt God had forgotten them and hidden His face (**Psalm 13:1-2**), they ended by admitting they trusted God and would rejoice in His salvation (**Psalm 13:5-6**).
 3. While they began by saying God had forsaken them (**Psalm 22:1**), they ended by admitting God would help them and they would tell of His help to everyone who would listen (**Psalm 22:19-31**).
 4. While they began by saying their soul was cast down (**Psalm 42:5, 6, 11**), they ended by admitting their hope was in God and He would lift them up and they would again praise Him (**Psalm 42:5, 11**).
 5. While they began by saying they were parched and tired of praying so much to God (**Psalm 69:1-3**), they ended by admitting they knew God would hear and respond and they would praise Him for it (**Psalm 69:30-36**).
 6. While they began by saying God had cast them off (**Psalm 74:1**), they ended by admitting God was their king from and had delivered them before and they knew He would again (**Psalm 74:12-17**).
 7. While they began by asking if God had abandoned His love, forgotten to be gracious and abandoned His compassion (**Psalm 77:4-9**), they end by admitting all of the past deliverance God had given and that there is no other God like their God (**Psalm 77:10-19**).
- B. Even in **Psalm 88**, though the psalm never turns to the positive, it is still offered because the Heman is sure that God is His salvation (**Psalm 88:1**).
- C. Expressing your feelings doesn't mean you don't have faith. It is just expressing where you really are in that moment. It is being honest with God. Apparently, rather than taking us away from God, it actually draws us closer to God. That is the case over and over again throughout the psalms.

IV. God is big enough to handle our feelings.

- A. When we interact with each other, we often become worried how others will react. We are afraid if we let them know that they angered us or hurt us, they will attack us. In fact, on many occasions that has happened. We learn very quickly not to express what we feel to those people. They aren't emotionally stable enough to handle our feelings. We get caught in a trap of trying to manage the feelings and reactions of others.
- B. We need to realize it is really not our job to manage the feelings and reactions of others. But for this lesson the point we need to see is that God is able to handle our feelings and emotions. God is big enough to hear what is going on in our hearts. He is not going to get defensive or reactionary. Even if our sadness, hurt, loneliness, anger, or fear is directed at Him. We can get bogged down in the argument of whether or not it is right to get mad at God. I don't know if it is or not. What I do know is that sometimes I do get mad at God. What am I supposed to do with that? I can be like Heman in **Psalm 88** and take it to God. He is big enough to handle it.
- C. What I try to remember is that God knew every feeling I would ever have before I even had it. He knew every thought, every complaint, every sin, every outburst, every expression. What did He do with all of that? According to **Romans 5:6-8**, He sent Jesus to die for me anyway. As long as I'm coming to Him in faith, this is God's response to my prayers no matter what I'm expressing. God is big enough to handle anything I carry to Him. That is why I need to carry it to Him. Because I'm not big enough to handle it all on my own.

- V. As we make a habit of bringing our reality to God, He will lead us to greater peace and joy.
- A. Almost every book and commentary on the psalms works hard to find some order to the **Psalms**. They try to find patterns in the five books. They try to see if there is some construction. Why were the various psalms lumped together as they were?
 - B. I think this point about honesty and candor is the basis for its construction. Unlike modern hymnals with categories of songs lumped together (R.J. Stevens' Hymns for Worship table of contents shows "Praise 0-58," "Prayer 59-96," "Devotion 97-150," "Lord's Supper 151-189," "Heaven 190-262," "Invitation 263-349," "Varied Themes 350-702"), the **Psalms** have no order.
 - C. Rather, they reflect the chaotic nature of our lives. One day, we may be flying on such highs we feel like we have ascended to heaven. The next, we may feel like we are making our bed in Sheol (cf. **Psalm 139:8**). In fact, it may not take a whole day to go through such a change. A phone call can change a glorious day into a nightmare. We can go crashing from the hymns of praise to the laments in a matter of minutes. At the same time, the reverse can happen as we gain some good news. Tremper Longman, III expresses this same thought by saying:

We are not surprised, then, that the Psalter does not present a systematic picture of God and his relationship to the world. The psalms give us theology written in intimate relationship with God and in close touch with life (How to Read the Psalms, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1988, p 53).

- D. With the above in mind, I think another of Longman's statements is quite interesting:

A decided shift takes place as we move from the beginning of the book to its end. As we move toward the end, praise overtakes lament until at the very end of the book we have a virtual fireworks of praise. The last seven psalms are not only all hymns of praise but they, for the most part, concentrate on calling the whole world to praise God...

In a real sense, the book of Psalms moves us from mourning to joy. As it says in Psalm 126, "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (v.5) (How to Read the Psalms, p 45).

The psalms demonstrate the reality of our lives. We are on a roller coaster of emotions, ups, downs, twists, turns. God is prepared to handle them all. But as we make a habit of bringing our reality to God and laying it at His feet, He works in us the peace and joy that leads us to a "virtual fireworks of praise." We may not be there today, but if we keep going to God honestly, we will be. If not in this life, in eternity.

Conclusion:

The psalmists are shocking in some of their prayers. I feel uncomfortable just reading some of what they say out loud. Yet there it is. God accepted it. God inspired it. We've learned a lot about praying like the psalmists, but perhaps the greatest lesson we must internalize is being honest with God, not simply telling God things that are true rather than false, but being completely transparent, real, candid. Why not spend some time today thinking about what you really feel about life, about people, about God and take that directly to Him in faith that He is the God of your salvation. He loves you and He wants to carry you through whatever you're facing.