

Praying Like the Psalmists: Being Creative

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Introduction:

Prayer is profound. Prayer is powerful. Prayer is absolutely serious. With that in mind, we might think that there is nothing playful or fun about praying. In fact, we would likely take affront at someone acting like there might be that aspect to prayer. That doesn't seem to be the psalmists' approach. Maybe I see it this way simply because of my own background in language and literature. However, I can't help but see a fun side to prayer in the psalms. The psalmists did not simply stand before God and in dry prose lay out their prayers. No one would ever confuse a psalm for a legal document that might put us to sleep if they read it for too long. The psalmists reveled in creativity. They worked hard at expressing themselves in creative ways. They rarely simply said something, rather they wrapped their prayers in word pictures to draw out emotions and drive home their pleas. Perhaps creativity is not an absolute must to proper and valid prayer, however, if we will pray like the Psalmists, we will learn to pray creatively.

Discussion:

I. Put words to our speechlessness.

- A. Today, we often pride ourselves in being speechless. Something is so great we can't put it into words. Something is so sad we can't comment on it. Something is so shocking we can only register our surprise with dumfounded looks. We can carry that into our prayer lives and act as though the greatest thing we can say to God is simply that we are speechless in His presence. The psalmists would have seen that as a great cop-out, not great praise. Perhaps the part that is most moving about the psalmists is how they crafted phrases and pictures in order to put words to the unspeakable emotions they felt in prayer.
- B. I love what J. Ellsworth Kalas says about this in his book, Longing to Pray: How the Psalms Teach Us to Talk to God:

You've known the frustration, I'm sure, in the experiences of human friendship and love, of saying to someone, "I just wish I could find the words to tell you what you mean to me" or "what our friendship means to me." So it is that the psalmist wants a "new song." And his exuberance is such that he calls on everyone else to join his choir: "all the earth," "all the peoples."

But our wonderful spiritual ancestor doesn't say, as we might, "I can't find words to express what I feel." He would see this, I think, as an unholy cop-out. So he launches into rolling phrases of praise, making us the richer for it (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2006, p 52).

- C. If we are going to pray as the psalmists did, then we will not be satisfied with declaring we can't put our thoughts into words. Rather, we will work and finding the words and phrases, drawing the word pictures that proclaim what we are thinking and feeling about God.

II. Examples of creativity from the **Psalms**.

- A. In the **Psalms**, God is not just our leader who rules or our teacher that instructs. He is our Shepherd (**Psalms 23**), leading us by quiet waters and in paths of righteousness. We are sheep, walking up the dangerous and deadly valleys to the mountaintop tablelands under the eyes of predators.
- B. The psalmists do not simply trust and rely on God. He is their rock, their mighty tower, their fortress, their shield, their deliverer, the horn of their salvation, their stronghold (**Psalms 18:1-2**).
- C. The psalmists did not merely have enemies who were trying to kill them. Their enemies were dogs that come back each evening howling and prowling about the city. They bellow with their mouths and have swords on their lips. They wander about for food and growl if they don't get any (**Psalms 59:6-7, 14-15**).
- D. The sins of the psalmists were not just mistakes that caused them problems. Their sins caused their bones to waste away. Their strength was dried up as if by the summer's heat (**Psalms 32:3-4**).
- E. The psalmists did not merely want to be forgiven of their iniquities. They wanted to be washed thoroughly and cleansed. They wanted to be purged with hyssop to be whiter than snow. They

wanted a new heart and a new spirit. They wanted the bones God had broken to rejoice (**Psalms 51:2, 7-12**).

- F. The psalmists did not merely fast. Rather, tears became their food day and night (**Psalms 42:3**). They had ashes as bread and tears as drink (**Psalms 102:9**).
- G. Perhaps it is these kinds of pictures that lead us to believe we cannot pray as the psalmists did. Yet, what heartfelt prayers they left us, prayers that dramatize what we face and feel. They left us prayers that capture the heart and express our deepest needs and thoughts. They set a great example for us.

III. Developing creativity in prayer.

- A. *Don't be too hard on yourself*: While many have held up the psalms as classic poetry to be learned for its literary value, I'm not suggesting you be creative in prayer in order to be a great poet. If your creativity never reaches the level of Frost, Dickinson, Byron, or Keats, that's okay. The reason I am suggesting creativity is simply to force us to think through what we are really feeling and want to take to God. I want us to learn to sing "the new songs," offer the new praises, recognize God is worth the effort we take to think through creative prayers. But a prayer does not have to be poetic to be proper. Remember, sometimes we do struggle with what to pray. Take comfort that the Spirit is interceding on your behalf with groanings too deep for words where you don't know how to pray. (**Romans 8:26-27**).
- B. *Be willing to work at it*: Let's face it, this kind of creativity rarely just tumbles off our tongues. It takes thought, effort, and work. If you remember our very first lesson in this series, we looked at a prayer and a psalm of Hezekiah in **Isaiah 38**. In **Isaiah 38:2**, we read the prayer. In **Isaiah 38:10-20**, we read the psalm he wrote from his prayer. There is no doubt this psalm would be used by others in prayer. But we cannot deny that the psalm took much more effort and work than the very simple prayer. Clearly, this demonstrates to us that the simple, natural, from the cuff prayer is legitimate, helpful, and valid. I'm not saying we aren't really praying unless we are being really creative. However, we do learn that if we want to find deeper expressions to our petitions and our praise, it is going to take work. It is going to take thinking about prayer before we pray.
- C. *Get comfortable with figurative language*: Metaphor, simile, hyperbole, symbolism: these are the tools of the psalmists. You don't have to know the names of the different classes of figurative speech. But if we will be creative as the psalmists were, we must be comfortable with speaking in figure. In **Psalms 51**, the psalmist uses figure over and over again. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean." Did the psalmist really mean he's asking God give him a bath and scrub him with a hyssop branch? Or was he talking about his need for forgiveness and spiritual purity? "Let the bones you have broken rejoice." Did the psalmist really mean God had actually and literally broken some bones? Or was he talking about how beaten down he felt from his guilt before God? "My sin is ever before me. Against you, you only I have sinned..." Did he mean that he had a picture of his sin that stayed in front of his eyes? Did he mean that he had never sinned against anyone else? Or was he exaggerating in order to demonstrate the great guilt he felt over his sins. "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Is the psalmist really saying his mother was a fornicator and his actual birth was an act of sin? Or is he again exaggerating his guilt to express how deeply he feels it. If we will pray like this we must get comfortable with figurative language.
- D. *Don't be bound by ancient figures*: Remember that these psalms were written during different times. The figurative language works for them because there was a cultural framework for those figures. We don't have to use their figures. We can use figures from our own experience and culture. Does anyone really still trust in horses and chariots (**Psalms 20:7**)? Or do we trust in tanks, jets, missiles? Nobody in our culture cleanses or scours anything with hyssop (**Psalms 51:7**). But we do with bleach, Tide, or Brillo pads. I know that purge me with hyssop sounds poetic, but does anybody here even know what that means? Does it really express something we are thinking if we don't know what it means? I do offer one word of caution, we do want to be careful in our public prayers what kind of creative figures we use. We don't want those we are leading in prayer to be distracted by our figures of speech.

- E. *Read poetry.* The fact is, we don't have to be completely original. We are allowed to use someone else's word pictures and phrases to express what is on our heart. Start by reading the **Psalms** regularly. As you find phrases and pictures that sing to you, adopt them in your prayers. However, you can also read other poetry. You'll be amazed at what great imagery we can find in the writings of men. How many people have been moved by Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar* and adopted his word picture to express their prayers around loss of a loved one or their own sickness and death?
- F. *Just try.* Anytime you're tempted to say, "Words cannot express..." Dig deep and try to express it. Think of similar experiences and relate them to whatever you're trying to express in prayer. Think of parallel thoughts and concepts and tie them together in your prayers. Experiment with them in your prayers until you find the pictures that really fit your meaning. Again, I caution too much experimentation in public praying. We don't want to distract those we are leading in prayer from the praying by what may end up being a silly attempt to make a point in prayer. Going back to an earlier example, it might sound too silly to ask God to cleanse us with steel wool or purify us with Lysol. Of course, I wonder how it sounded to the first person who said, "You know that hyssop branch we use to scour things clean with? Cleanse me like that, God, and I'll be clean."

Conclusion:

While we have learned some great and profound lessons about prayer from the psalmists, I have to admit that for me, this is the most enjoyable lesson. This is the part where I realize that prayer doesn't have to be a chore. It can be an exciting experiment in language. It can be fun to look at life, our experiences, our needs, our praises. We don't have to be limited by the basic dry prose of literalistic speech. We can branch out and really try to put words and word pictures to those great feelings, needs, desires we want to carry to God. The psalmists did it. So can we.