

Praying the Psalms

William Stell

May 7, 2017

Psalm 109:1-5, 29-31 — Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, even while I pray for them. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love. ... May my accusers be clothed with dishonor; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle. With my mouth I will give great thanks to the LORD; I will praise God in the midst of the throng. For God stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death.

Whenever we read or listen to the Bible, it's easy to forget where the words come from. It's easy to forget that every biblical book and every biblical passage had a life of its own long before the Bible existed. For example, when the apostle Paul wrote what we now call Galatians, he didn't sit down to write Holy Scripture for billions of people over the course of thousands of years; no, he sat down to write a letter, addressed to a particular community of Christians in a place within modern-day Turkey called Galatia.

Likewise, when the Israelite king David and others were writing what we now find in the biblical book called "Psalms," they didn't sit down to write chapters for Holy Scripture; they sat down to write songs, poems, and prayers for themselves and for their own communities. Over time, these songs, poems, and prayers were compiled into various collections, translated into numerous languages, passed on from culture to culture, passed down from generation to generation. Years after they were first composed, the Psalms became a part of Scripture for the Jewish faith, and centuries later, we Christians followed suit. Now, when you and I read one of the psalms *today*, we tend to think of it as just reading a chapter of the Bible, which Christians regard as the Word of God to us. It's easy to forget that long before these chapters were venerated as the Word of God, they were more modestly presented as words *to* God in prayer and words *for* God in worship. It's easy to forget that both of our scripture readings from Psalms today are actually a lot like the prayers that you're writing on those index cards and a lot like the hymns that we're singing in our services.

Today is our second Sunday in this three-week sermon series on prayer. Last week was a bit of an introduction: we talked about how prayer is often hard for us — and that makes sense, because we are *humans* trying to connect with *God*. We talked about how it's okay to feel like we're stumbling in the dark when we pray, and there really isn't a wrong way to pray; as long as we are trying to honestly share ourselves — our thoughts and feelings, our desires and fears — we're doing alright. Now, today, in week two, I'd like to get a bit more practical. I'd like to give you some concrete resources, some prayers that you can fall back on when you feel like it. Sometimes, it's nice to borrow someone else's prayer, rather than come up with the words ourselves. And what better prayers to borrow than ones that are right here in our Bibles? So,

today, we're going to talk about praying the psalms, and I'm going to invite you, at some point this upcoming week, to choose one of several chapters from this book of the Bible, to read that chapter, and to make it your own prayer as you read it.

But first, we've got to get something out on the table here: many of the prayers in the Book of Psalms don't sound at all like Psalm 23. By that, I mean not all of these prayers are pleasant and palatable. Some of them, I guarantee, you will not want to pray in their entirety. Listen to these words from Psalm 109, which are in between the verses that we read for our second reading. "May my accuser's children be orphans, and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit." Doesn't sound all that holy, does it? And it gets worse than that. Here are the last two verses of Psalm 137: "Happy are those who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy are those who take your infants and dash them against the rock!" There's no hidden meaning here, no contextual information that makes this any less horrifying. To be blunt, I don't like reading this passage from the pulpit. I don't feel comfortable reading this, then saying, "The word of the Lord." What are we supposed to do with verses like that?

Let's go back to what we said at the beginning: in the Psalms, we are reading not just the Word of God, but words *to* God. We are reading the words of people praying, people sharing their thoughts and feelings, their desires and fears — and not just the pleasant and palatable ones. In the Psalms, we encounter people who feel not just sad, but despairing; not just hurt, but betrayed; not just angry, but enraged. In the Psalms, people feel bitter, vengeful, completely hopeless, completely abandoned by God. And that, friends, can be our liberation in prayer.

Theologian Ellen Davis writes that "[The Psalms] enable us to bring into our conversation with God feelings and thoughts that most of us think we need to get rid of before God will be interested in hearing from us." She uses the example of feeling angry with God. For some reason, many of us think that this is a bad, unacceptable thing. Our first reading this morning says otherwise, and so do many of the psalms. As I see it, we not only *can* convey anger towards God in prayer, but at times, we *should* convey anger towards God in prayer! There are times when getting mad at God is precisely what our relationship with God needs. As Ellen Davis writes, "We cannot have an intimate relationship with someone to whom we cannot speak honestly." She calls the Psalms a "First Amendment for the faithful," guaranteeing us "complete freedom of speech before God." Think of what it would look like if you were to lash out at God, if you were to be utterly rash and brazenly accusatory in a prayer. I guarantee you that the most offensive words you can think of won't be any more offensive than some of the words that are right there in your Bibles. You don't have to shy away from those emotions, or any others that may seem inappropriate or impious. God can handle our big, bad emotions, friends.

So, I'm going to give you six options for your homework this week, and I invite you to choose one of them. After I go through them once, I'll repeat them, so just take all of them in this time, and then be ready the second time around to make a note of which one you want to do. Option #1: If you're feeling any degree of anger towards God — perhaps you feel like God hasn't given

you what you need or what you deserve, or perhaps you feel more like God is cursing you than like God is blessing you — try reading and praying Psalm 22 this week. Option #2: If you feel like there's someone who has wronged you, if you feel like God should vindicate you over and against someone who is acting like your enemy, then pray Psalm 109 — but a word of caution here: this is not a license to be self-righteous, to get back at someone, or to hold onto resentment indefinitely; rather, it is simply a way of expressing to God how you feel. And after you pray this psalm the first time, be sure to ask yourself: Is there anyone who might choose to pray this psalm about *me* or about my community? Who might feel wronged by me or people like me? Option #3: If you are feeling desperate, if you feel burdened by sadness or anxiety and feel like you need to be rescued, then pray Psalm 6 sometime this week. Option #4: If you are feeling abandoned by God and by others, and if you feel like it might actually be good for you to sit with those feelings of abandonment for a while, try praying Psalm 88. Option #5: If you feel guilt or shame weighing on you and feel like you need a prayer of confession before next Sunday comes, try praying Psalm 51. And lastly, option #6: If you are feeling grateful for God's work in your life and simply want to rejoice in what God has done, try praying Psalm 30, 65, and 103 this week. I wanted to give you a few more options for happier psalms to pray.

So, to repeat: 1) feeling angry with God, Psalm 22; 2) feeling wronged by someone, Psalm 109; 3) feeling desperate and in need of help, Psalm 6; 4) feeling alone and ready to sit with despair, Psalm 88; 5) feeling guilt or shame and eager to repent, Psalm 51; and 6) feeling grateful and ready to rejoice, Psalm 30, 65, and 103. I've also posted these six options on the door leading out of the sanctuary, so feel free to review it there as you leave today.

Again, friends, God can handle all of these kinds of prayers. As we come to the table today, we are reminded that God can handle and that God has handled infinitely worse. Amen.