

# Using the Psalms to Improve Our Praying

Many Christians are embarrassed or ashamed to admit they don't know how to pray well. Preachers tell us prayer is simply "talking to God." Yet, all sorts of big and little questions persist about the manner and mode of prayer, attitudes required, and what we ought to expect.

Sometimes we imagine that there are things we think or feel that we can't bring to God. Are some of our concerns off limits? A study of the psalms may help answer these questions.

Jesus' disciples realized they needed help learning to pray. They were not shy and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray as John the Baptist had taught his disciples (Luke 11:1). So, Jesus gave them a "model" prayer (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). Obviously, proper prayer isn't instinctive. Since it can be taught, it seems prudent to use a resource like the psalms to assist us.

One writer has suggested that "the psalms make it possible to say things that are otherwise unsayable." Like Jesus' model prayer, the psalms teach us *how* to pray by showing us examples.

Many a preacher, preparing for a sermon, has found a thought phrased by another writer that

seems superior to any words he has thought of to express the idea. Therefore, the preacher either quotes or adapts with some modification the superior phraseology. The psalms are a fantastic sourcebook for expressing some of our deepest thoughts. Can any saint be faulted for quoting or paraphrasing

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Scripture in talking with God? One writer has observed that the psalms provide "a repertoire of human sentiments and experiences with which we can match our own." In other words, we appropriate the language and thought of Scripture (a psalm) to our own circumstances.

We certainly have divinely recorded precedent for quoting psalms in prayer. Jonah did so (Jon. 2). And, even more importantly, Jesus endured the cross, quoting from psalms in His final prayer before He died (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34;

Luke 23:46). The early disciples did so as well (Acts 4:24-26).

## Using Jesus' Model Prayer and the Psalms

As recorded in Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus taught several important principles in regard to prayer, including:

**1. How to address God.** The pattern Jesus taught was, "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name."

- Psalm 8:1 offers an alternative, "O Lord, Our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth." Psalm 25 begins, "To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in You."
- David's great plea for mercy begins, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to the multitude of Your tender mercies" (Psa. 51:1). Also, observe how the following psalms begin their address: 28, 54, 61, 63, 67, 75, 86, 88, 90, 102, 141, 143

**2. Pray that God's will be done.** Jesus' wording was, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

- Compare Psalm 57:11—"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; Let Your glory be above all the earth."

**3. Ask for assistance with our physical needs.** The Lord's model focused on but one of those needs, saying, "Give us this day our daily bread."

- Psalm 144:12-15 illustrate this further with requests for healthy children, full barns, fertile livestock, and safe streets.

**4. Request help with our spiritual needs.** Again, Jesus just gave one example of such, saying, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And, do not

lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

- David’s penitent plea in Psalm 51 illustrates such spiritual needs and requests about as well as any passage in Scripture.

### **5. How to conclude a prayer.**

Jesus’ prayer concluded, “For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

- Jesus ends His model prayer with praise and Psalm 36:5-9 is but one of many illustrations of similar praise in the psalms.

### **Another Set of Prayer Patterns**

The book of Psalms presents a beautiful pattern for prayer, which will assist the godly in better addressing God and receiving the fullest blessings from the habit of prayer. Here is that pattern:

#### **1. Reviewing the past.**

Looking back at our problems, failures, sins, and triumphs. Such review helps us, first of all, to appreciate that God has always been faithful.

- #### **2. Reflecting on God.**
- From such a review one should move to reflection on God’s character, expanding our understanding of who He is and what fellowship with Him entails.

#### **3. Recalling God’s promises.**

By renewing in our minds the promises God has made, we find our faith enlivened and strengthened.

- #### **4. Asking God to act.**
- Then, based on God’s character, re-

cord, and promises, we are positioned to ask Him, in a proper manner, to act on our behalf.

### **Expanding the Subject Matter of Our Prayers**

A careful overview of the prayer psalms can serve to show us a much broader scope of subjects for prayer. If we limit our prayers to thanks for our food, homes, family, and salvation; to requests to help the sick and spiritually ailing; and to personal petitions in times of cri-



sis or when caught in sin, we may be robbing ourselves and shorting God at the same time.

The psalms showcase language that praises God for His righteous ways, thus elevating and impressing such a standard of good on our own minds. When was the last time that you, like the psalmists, asked God for wisdom? Or for courage?

Here are some psalms that help us express ourselves when in certain circumstances:

- When afraid—3, 91
- When alone—27
- When envious of others—73
- When sad—13

- When weak—40, 121, 142
- When worried—37
- When tempted—141
- When you feel like praising God—96, 100, 145

### **Special Prayers in the Psalms**

1. A prayer for dependence—Psalm 86
2. Prayer expressing a longing for God—Psalm 63
3. Expression of trust in God—Psalm 62
4. Prayer of distress—Psalm 57
5. Declaration of gratitude to God—Psalm 65
6. A prayer expressing grief—Psalm 102
7. Special prayer when God seems to be silent—Psalm 44
8. Expression of joy to God—Psalm 66
9. A prayer of desperation—Psalm 142
10. A prayer of despair—Psalm 88
11. A Cry to God for help—Psalm 3
12. A Prayer of penitence—Psalm 51
13. Seeking God in the midst of fear—Psalm 23
14. Prayer in the face of doubt—Psalm 73
15. When facing death—Psalm 90
16. Expressing our praise of God—Psalm 150

### **Expanding Our Vision of God**

The psalms can serve to help us see God in new lights. Not only is He our Father in heaven, He is our shield, deliverer, teacher, refuge, healer, judge, rock, and best listener. The psalms speak of all these and more.

Drawing closer to God requires not only imitation of Him in obedience but growing in awareness of



His divine character, work, and interactions with us.

### **Being Honest When We Pray**

Many of the psalms speaking to God are shocking to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian readers, for they express deep feelings that seem to us to border on blasphemy. It is tempting to express to God only the feelings we think are appropriate to share with the Almighty, but doing so vastly limits both the scope and results of praying.

We've already looked at the imprecatory psalms, where saints called upon God to judge their enemies, to cut off evil and evil-doers. We certainly are taught to love our enemies (as were Old Testament saints), but like the martyred saints under the altar, there remains a place for us to cry for God's vindication and righteous judgment on all evil (Rev. 6:9-10).

We need to express our true thoughts and feelings to God in prayer, not merely words that we imagine He will find acceptable.

As you read the prayer psalms, notice some of the subjects addressed that we seldom think of praying about.

### **Improving the Language of Prayer**

Let us be cautious here. We are not suggesting a need to impress men with our ability to use special, decorative, or cosmetic language in prayer. But, when a man is leading prayer in a public assembly there is great value in being able to express with power and intensity both the thoughts of those he is leading and, perhaps, thoughts they need to be led to think and pray.

The psalms are poetry, as we've observed before. Believe it or not, the language of poetry is not about speaking in flowery language, but about speaking in condensed, pithy, and powerful words that intensely focus the mind on the subject at hand.

Thus, there is much for the public prayer leader to learn from the psalms as he seeks to focus a congregation in praise, petition, and thanksgiving.

We regularly copy prayer phrases we hear others speak. Why not phrases and words from a divinely inspired book of prayer?

### **Secondary Value of Prayer**

The primary efficacy of prayer is found in the fact that God "an-

swers" our prayers, often intervening, lifting up, removing difficulties or otherwise seeing to our best interests.

But, many Christians have observed another value in talking with God. Like a talk with a parent or friend, the *process* often allows us to work our way through a problem, to discover answers or change attitudes.

A number of the psalms seem to illustrate this process, beginning with cries of agony, despair, frustration, or fear. But, as the psalm progresses, the psalmist reflects on truths about God. He speaks aloud of how God has helped in times past. He adds together the sum of his discoveries or remembrances and then speaks in confidence that God will again aid him. And, he often concludes with praise for God.

Through this process, the immediate challenge or dilemma may not have been changed at that moment, but the one praying has been aided, his spirit calmed, his hope restored, his peace recaptured.

Psalm 22 will serve as our primary example, though there are many others. It is this psalm that Jesus drew attention to as He hung on the cross, quoting the first line, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" If Jesus' use of the first line is intended to draw attention to the entire psalm, then He is likely identifying Himself and His feelings with the whole psalm as well.

Notice that the prayer of Psalm 22 begins with an emotional outburst expressing the feeling of abandonment by God and fear that God is not listening. However, the psalm quickly turns to recollection of God's holiness, His past faithfulness and deliverance of Israel.

The psalmist then returns to the cause of his prayer, which is his terrible plight as men mistreat him. The original psalm well describes Jesus' plight on the cross, and the psalm turns from expression of his

condition to a plea for God's help. Then, perhaps surprisingly at first, the psalmist declares, "You have answered me." The psalm ends with a call to praise God.

The praying psalmist progresses from an outburst of fear and agony to an outburst of praise. And, notice the steps in that progress. There is a major lesson about prayer in this.

## Homework and Questions

*Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.*

1. Do you consider anything off limits when it comes to prayer? \_\_\_\_\_  
What about feelings of hatred or great aggravation that you feel for someone? \_\_\_\_\_  
What about feelings of doubt you might have about some statement in Scripture? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How do you address God when you pray? \_\_\_\_\_  
Do you address Him the same every time? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why is this address important, in your view? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Jesus taught against "vain repetition" in prayer, pointing us toward credible communication with God and not a mere rote repetition of someone else's words again and again. However, Jesus also provided a model prayer for His disciples. With that in mind, what can you find of a useful nature in the prayers of inspired Scripture?  
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4. Find one or more psalms that incorporate the following elements:  
A reviewing of past problems, failures, sins, and triumphs. \_\_\_\_\_  
Reflection on God's character. \_\_\_\_\_  
Recalling God's promises. \_\_\_\_\_  
Asking God to act. \_\_\_\_\_
5. After observing the progression of thought in Psalm 22, from a feeling of abandonment to praise of God for all His aid, do you ever see such a progression in your own personal prayers? If so, to what do you attribute this?  
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6. What have you learned about prayer in your study of the psalms? Be prepared to share with the class. \_\_\_\_\_  
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