

PRAYER IN PSALMS & LAMENTATIONS

As we move further into the Old Testament, we see that God's people often call on Him in prayer when they are in need of something. However, we also see a shift in their prayers as we look at books such as Psalms and Lamentations. It is here where we are given insight into our own communication with God – He wants us to speak and connect with Him, no matter how we are feeling. The theologian, John Calvin, says of Psalms, *“There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”* Whether it is our anger or joy, our fear or our confidence, God wants us to call on Him – no topic or emotion is off limits. It is this true personal connection that we need and that He desires.

PRAYER IN THE PSALMS

Let's look at Psalms first. Generally, we think of David as the psalmist, but there were several authors. The Hebrew term for “psalm” is *mizmor*, meaning, “something sung,” which is why the book is often referred to as a sort of hymnal. And yet, in Hebrew, the book of Psalms is referred to as *Tehilim*, meaning “praises.” With this title, the various psalmists show us man's ultimate calling – to use language to praise God's greatness and express our gratitude to Him for all He has done, both individually and collectively.

Though psalms are often thought of as songs, they are also prayers because the psalmists address and call on God throughout their varied life experiences. It is through their words to Him that we see how the human need for God has not changed throughout the centuries.

There are three main types of prayers in Psalms.

1. **Hymn** – the psalmist expresses praise to God, often exclaiming the many great characteristics of God; exemplified in Psalm 71 – *For You are my rock and my fortress...* (verse 3), *You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth...* (verse 5), *You are my strong refuge...* (verse 7), *I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only...*

*I pray because I can't
help myself. I pray
because I'm helpless.
I pray because the
need flows out of me
at all times – waking
and sleeping. It
doesn't change God
– it changes me.*

C.S. LEWIS (1898-1963)

(verse 16), ...do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come. Also Your righteousness, O God, is very high, You who have done great things; O God, who is like You? (verses 18-19).

2. **Lament** – the psalmist is sorrowful over his own struggles or for the lives of people who are broken or troubled, appealing to God to intervene in some way. An example of this is Psalm 120 – *In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me. Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue* (verses 1-2).
3. **Thanksgiving** – the psalmist shares his joy with God and is positive or hopeful, though he shows awareness of an earlier struggle or lament. This is illustrated beautifully in Psalm 30: *You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, to the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever* (verses 11-12).

Though the psalmists wrote their prayers and songs based on events that happened in their own lives, their experiences were written about in such a way that their words could be used as a template for the prayers of others in similar situations. Even Jesus used the psalms as a way to express His own suffering. While on the cross, He spoke the words from Psalm 22:1 to cry out to His Father – *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?* – giving us insight into His feelings. From Jesus' own example, we see that we are able to use words from Scripture in our own prayers to God, and that Psalms is a good place to start.

One way to reinvigorate our prayers is to use Scripture as a guide, letting each phrase direct our thoughts and expressions towards God.





Psalm 23

Of all the psalms, the one most frequently referenced as a prayer is Psalm 23 – *The Lord is my Shepherd*. A powerful statement in this psalm is: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me (v.4)*. In describing this Bible text, Chief Apostle Schneider stated: “The valley of the shadow of death symbolizes our tribulations. When we are afflicted, Jesus:

- **is with us** – do not think He has forgotten us or left us alone. He takes part in our suffering.
- **guides us** – He leads us to our heavenly home. Trials are part of our spiritual journey. Jesus tells us how to go through difficult passages without harming our soul. Let us trust Him and follow His advice, even if they do not seem valid.
- **defends us** – He watches over us and ensures that the test does not become too difficult for us.
- **draws us to Him** – in misfortune, we sometimes tend to isolate ourselves. Jesus urges us to come to Him, to address His servants, and to remain in the fellowship of His people.
- **cares for us** – providing us with His consolation, comfort, and peace.

As long as we remain with Jesus, we have nothing to fear. He looks after us and surely leads us into His kingdom” (France – October 2019).

Let's look at Psalm 23 as an example:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. – Reflect on the words. How have you experienced the Lord as your shepherd? How has He cared for you? Who else is God to you? Are you satisfied with what He has given you in life?

He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me besides the still waters. – Thank God for His provision in your life, for His presence, for His peace and calm that gives you strength.

He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. – How have you felt restored by God? What does it mean to you that you can feel renewed and restored every time you repent and experience His grace and forgiveness? Have you felt God leading you? Where have you tried to go your own way? Take moments to lay before Him what paths you want to take, and listen for His guidance and direction.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. – What valleys are you walking through in your life? What fears do you have? Bring them to God and praise Him for His presence, His protection, and His faithfulness to you.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. – Who are your enemies? Express to God your thankfulness for His care, even in the midst of these struggles and adversaries. What has God anointed you with? What gifts and blessings has He bestowed on you? Pray for opportunities to develop and share these gifts.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. – Thank Christ for the confidence and hope for the future that you have in Him. Express your longing to be with Him.

Praying through Scripture in this way helps us to focus our prayers, gives us new and refreshing ways to speak with God, and encourages us to better understand His will. In addition, we are given the opportunity to study and perhaps memorize His Word.

Though we may find ourselves connecting to the emotions and words shared in Psalms, we must first read the book from the vantage point of the authors and original audience, as we should do with all passages out of the Bible. Reading Psalms through the lens of these people, we learn the history of God's people and their specific concerns and joys. This history also helps us to understand our own place in God's plan of salvation and the good that He works for His people.

As people living in the time after Jesus Christ, we are also able to read the psalms in the light of Christ. When reading the psalms with Christ in mind, we see that there are many references to Him, pointing us to the future time when He would come to earth, redeem mankind, ascend to the right hand of the Father, and eventually return again to gather up His own. We find one such reference in Psalm 118:22 – *The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone*. Mankind rejected Jesus Christ, leading to His crucifixion, and yet, He is the cornerstone of the gospel and the truth that sets all people free from sin when they believe in His sacrifice and resurrection. And later in Acts, Peter refers to Psalm 110 as he preaches to the people gathered – *For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ* (Acts 2:34-36). Peter speaks these words to show the people that Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, that He is the long-awaited Messiah.

When we see glimpses of Jesus Christ in Psalms, we can understand that both the Old and New Testaments point us to Him. References to His sacrifice remind us of the grace we've received that allows us to have a relationship with God. This is the point of prayer: to deepen and grow in this relationship, to bring praise to God, to show that we know He has already fulfilled His promise in sending our Savior, and that He will continue to fulfill His promises, and to share our emotions and requests with Him. And we do all of this in Jesus' name because He is the reason that we have eternal life and a future.

Whether the psalms were used in temple liturgy, as some were, or were used for personal thanksgiving, confession, and as a method of self-reflection, they encourage all believers to be bold in their prayers to God. We can be honest with Him, whether our prayers are filled with lament or praise. Sometimes both components are present in our prayers, such as with the words of Psalm 77. The psalmist begins by speaking of the difficulties of life – *I am so troubled that I cannot speak* (verse 4). By verses 13 and 14, the tone is quite different – *Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary; who is so great a God as our God? You are the God who does wonders...* As humans, our emotions can shift quite easily, and that is apparent in Psalms. In this way, the Psalms also speak to the idea of a conversation with God in that we often witness a change in the heart of the psalmist. He perceives the presence and strength of God in dialogue with Him and, through this, is changed.

Throughout the book of Psalms, we see again and again the devotion that is given to God. When the psalms inspire our own prayers, we exercise our knowledge of God's goodness. We express our dependence on Him throughout our lives, with its various and ever-changing hills and valleys. We find that the psalms enrich our prayers, connecting us to Him and also to all people throughout time who have called on God with the same needs and emotions as us.



Let the Psalms

inspire your prayers