

How to Pray the Psalms
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Tonight I hope to take you deeper in your experience of praying the psalms. You will want to have access to Psalm 27, as well as to something to write on. So, if you need to assemble a Bible and a pen and paper or a notes app, go ahead and do that now while I give a few preliminary remarks.

The Psalms are the prayer book of God's people.

The word Psalms means "songs."

As such they poetry, though not the way we think of rhyming poetry.

150 Psalms, divided into five books.

Written over the course of several hundred years by several different authors.

A huge number were written by David, but others by Asaph, the sons of Korah, and anonymous.

There are different kinds of psalms reflecting the different human emotions in prayer.

- There are **Psalms of Praise**, like Psalm 103, Bless the LORD O My soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.
- There are **Psalms of Thanksgiving**, such as Psalm 118, "Give thanks to the LORD because he is good."
- There are **Psalms of Lament**, asking God "Why?" and "How Long" in the midst of suffering, such as Psalm 13 "How long, O LORD, how long? Will you forget me forever?"
- There are those tricky **Imprecatory Psalms** in which we pray for the LORD to smite our enemies, such as Psalm 58 "O God, break the teeth in their mouths!"
- There are **Psalms of Confession**, such as Psalm 51 "Against you, you only have I sinned."
- There are **Wisdom Psalms** which are not so much prayers as songs of how to live rightly, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD."

The psalms cover the entire range of human emotions. They express the reality of our lives more deeply than we can usually have words. And they express this reality of our lives in the presence of God. They do what is so hard for us to do: interact between daily life and God himself.

The psalms can be **individual prayers or communal prayers**. They have from the beginning been used in gathered worship. The whole people of God prays these psalms. Even if the psalm does not express something I am feeling in the moment, it yet expresses something someone in our community is going through, and so I pray with everyone else, joining my heart beyond my immediate feelings to those of others, even those of the whole nation.

Connected to More Lives

Theologian Patrick Reardon describes how thrilling this kind of praying the psalms can be:

When I pray the lines of [a] psalm, its reference is not reduced to the things that happen to be going on in my individual life. I am playing a part, rather, in the larger and transforming drama of redemption. The paltry circumstances of my own existence are taken up, through this prayer, into the ongoing history of God's people."¹

Praying the psalms, personally or as congregations, gathers us into the whole parade through history of those who celebrate, lament, give thanks and cry out to the God who has been at work in the world.

Connected to the Big Story

Anglican bishop and scholar N. T. Wright suggests that when we look at the psalms as a whole, we see “the great epic poem of the creator and covenant God who will at the last visit and redeem his people and, with them, his whole creation.”² In other words, the psalms as a whole reflect the overarching story of Scripture. That macro-narrative has its fulfillment in Jesus. So as Jesus stands in our midst and takes up these psalms, he enfolds to himself the entire experience of the trials and joys of being people in a covenant relationship with the LORD. He gathers our prayers as he does our lives, making them his own even as he cleanses, redeems and shapes them in himself.

Connected to Jesus

Very importantly, the psalms are the prayer book of Jesus. He knew the psalms by heart. He prayed them in synagogue and in private prayer. He quoted from them in his teachings and in his prayers.

Reformed Bible scholar Michael Morales explains,

One of the precious facets of the Psalms in general, namely, that as songs they uniquely convey the inward depths of the soul, and especially of Christ's soul. Not only do the Psalms help shape our response to God in the trials and joys of life, then, but they also reveal to us something of the inner life of Jesus Christ, glimpses we do not have through the Gospels alone.³

Joel Miller agrees, "We say the Psalms and we become more like him. When we pray the Psalms in Jesus' name, they submerge our shallow souls to deeper fathoms in Christ. They ready and prepare our bodies for the tasks of the Savior."

If we want to move deeply into the heart of Jesus, we want to pray the same prayers that he prayed. His heart is revealed in the psalms. Especially as we pray a psalm imagining Jesus praying it in a particular circumstance in his life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer adds,

How is it possible for a man and Jesus Christ to pray the Psalter together? It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we. Therefore it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.⁴

So, we pray psalms
To express and deepen **our relation** to God
To discover our **connection to others**.
(**Even to love our enemies**)
To deepen our **connection to Jesus**.

How to Pray a Psalm

In approaching any type of Scripture:

Take a leap of faith to trust that this is God's Word.

To believe that God desires to speak with you through this Word.

To ask God to do just that, speak to you and connect you to him.

We're going to take up Psalm 27 as a rich source for prayer.

Prayer.

Fishing.

Go to the pond. (you're here!)

Bait the hook (believe and pray)

Wait for a nibble. Wait to hear a tug.

I'm going to read Psalm 27 aloud all the way through.

Follow along.

Listen for a phrase or verse that tugs at you, something that you want to work with, something that tugs at you.

Read Psalm 27

Next, read it on your own. Again, listen and be aware of the nibble you get from the Spirit. We're going to take a couple of minutes for this, so take your time.

When you have a phrase, write it down.

If you're watching in a group, share your "nibbles" with each other.

Then, scroll Psalm 27 again while Chris Plays for two minutes.

If you are fishing, once you have a nibble, you have to reel in the fish. Some are easier than others! Some you have to let them out, pull them in, dance with them.

Reeling in means to ponder what it is that grabs you in the phrase you selected.

Ask it questions. Write some notes. What do you like about this phrase? In what areas of life does this phrase apply? What do you want from this phrase? What questions arise from it. To who else in your life might it apply?

We'll take two minutes for you to jot down some notes answering these questions.

Chris plays for two minutes while these questions come on screen.

Now, you're ready actually to pray part of this psalm as your own!
You can pray it by taking a little bit of the psalm and expanding it in your own words. Say to God what it means and what it means to you.

I'll show you using the first verses as an example;

The LORD is my light and my salvation.
Whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
Of whom shall I be afraid?

I'm drawn to this verse.

This is about the LORD. That's LORD in all capital letters. It means the LORD I Am, Yahweh, the one true God. This God is specifically the God who called Abraham to believe in him. This is the God that brought his people out of slavery and gave them his commandments. This is the God who came to us as Jesus Christ. This is the God who is a person, who entered our space and time. This is the God of the Scriptures, the Creator of all. I can turn personally to this God. He cares for me and knows my name.

The LORD, this LORD, is my light.
Light shines in the dark. Light guides. Light comforts. Light reveals.
Light warms. Light makes plants grow. Light is essential to life.

LORD, God of all, my God, you are my light.
Sometimes I don't know what to do, but when I ask I find that you guide me.
When all went dark, you lit the way. When I wanted darkness, you shone light on me anyway. You called me into your marvelous light. Jesus you are the light of the world. You show the way. You give life. You create growth.

Right now, when the world seems dark, when night seems on us, people getting sick, people isolated, people destroying cities, people hating each other, I know the darkness does not have the last word. In fact, Jesus, you said that the light, your light, you, shine in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome the light.

You are my light. And you are my **salvation**.

You save me in so many ways! You have spared my life to this point.

I remember there were times when I could have died, but I live.
Accidents, warfare, illness, addiction, stupid mistakes, inattention; destructive relationships, poverty: you saved me!

You have saved me from my self. From self-tyranny. From being helpless before my desires. For impulses that destroy. From obsessions. From intrusive thoughts, From sinful thoughts.

You have saved me from anxiety, from fear for the future. From fear of death. From fear of failure. From fear of the unknown.

You have saved me from sin. From stains I cannot cleanse. From evil I have done. From guilt I could not absolve. From the weariness of my life my way.
You are my light and my salvation.

Of whom shall I be afraid?

And yet I am afraid. I am afraid I will get sick. Get fired. Mess up a relationship. Spread the virus. I'm afraid nothing will be the same. I fear I will always be alone. I fear the church will never regather. I fear running out of money. I fear people who hate me.

But you, you, LORD God of Israel, Lord Jesus Christ, you are my stronghold. My safe place. The net underneath. The rock. The strong savior. The God who holds time and space in your nail pierced hands. You endured the worst. Everything we fear happened to you, Lord Jesus, and you came out the other side in resurrected life. You are the stronghold of my life, so really, I mean really, truly, "of whom shall I be afraid?"

One verse, one phrase can be so powerful as you let it run through you and become a staircase of prayer rising up to our God!

Now you try. Make some notes as Chris plays for two minutes, phrases you could use in prayer. Expand your verse by speaking to God.

Chris plays for two minutes.

How did you do? You've got on your phone or on your page great material for a rich time of prayer. Imagine what could happen if you kept working the verse of this psalm, combining them, deepening?

The great thing about working with one phrase or verse is that you can take it with you through the day. Say it at a stoplight or on a break.

The LORD is my light and my salvation. You can make up tunes. You can say it in a whisper or a shout.

Now that's the foundation. Let's see how we can vary it during the week.

Tuesday: As a Prayer of Jesus

Read the psalm once.

Read the psalm aloud, imagining that Jesus is praying it.

Whenever you see LORD or God, say instead "My Father."

Ponder at what stage in his life this psalm might have fit Jesus.

If you don't remember many events from Jesus' life, you might start reading the Gospel of Mark during this study. Just one chapter a day. Go through Mark several times and see how the psalms we study link to events.

For example, consider how the verse we've been working with might have sounded coming from Jesus' lips during his forty days of fasting and being tempted in the wilderness. Satan's temptations would have played on human fears in Jesus, fears of failing, fears of suffering, fears of being misunderstood. How would these words have sounded as he faced down the devil?

My Father is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?

My Father is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

Or in Gethsemane?

Wednesday: For Someone You Love

Hold someone you love in mind as you read the psalm aloud.

Consider how its words relate to their life. Pray it aloud again as if your loved one were praying it.

Who is walking in the darkness? Who is afraid? Who feels weak.

Imagine these words on their lips.

Imagine an unbeliever you love saying these words.

Thursday: As Part of Community

Follow the same pattern, only today pray the psalm imagining that you are surrounded by fellow Christians in a great worship service. Imagine as you pray it aloud twice that everyone is vocalizing it together.

Friday: For Someone Who is Difficult or Hostile

Follow the same pattern, only today pray the psalm imagining someone you struggle to love: even, especially, if it seems unlikely this person would *ever* pray a psalm!

¹ Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2000), xiii.

² N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), p. 33.

³ L. Michael Morales, "Jesus and the Psalms," *Tabletalk*, April 1, 2011.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Mineapolis: Augsburg, 1970),