

Psalms as Prayers

Psalms 4 and 5

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Introduction

1. I am focusing our attention during September on biblical prayers to determine how our prayers might change in light of these examples. The psalms provide the best and largest examples of prayers in the Bible. If we look carefully at them, we can allow them to train us in how to pray. In fact, they go further and give us actual tools for prayer. They can become our prayers, not so focused on doing and getting, but on being and becoming.

2. Eugene Peterson wrote a little book in 1986 on the psalms as tools, "Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us" (*Answering God*, 2). To understand how they work we need a couple of background insights.

3. The first insight we need to grasp is why the psalms work as prayers. Language is one of the most amazing things about being human. How can mere wisps of air carry emotions and feelings, relay information, and give motivation? Linguists break language into three levels – level I, the emotive language of feelings; level II, the informational level passing on facts; and level III, providing motivation to do or act. The reality is that we weave all three into most of our language events. However, we seem to use levels II and III more than level I. In our culture, we feel more comfortable with levels II and III. The psalms are poetry; poetry gushes with feelings, emotions, desires, with being and becoming. And that is why they work as prayers.

4. A second insight for background to the psalms as prayers derives from their historical contexts. 73 psalms are attributed to David, two-thirds all together to some author, some even giving historical contexts for the occasion of the prayer. The age of the headings is debated, and the assigning an historical event from David's story (or Solomon or Moses, etc.) doesn't always exactly fit with that psalm, but what this background does is prime the pump. We don't find enough specifics to tie them clearly to an historical event, but we find enough incentive to apply it to something similar in our lives. That's why the psalms have been the prayer book for Jews and Christians for millennia.

What do the psalms teach us about prayer? Or perhaps the question should be, *how* do they teach us to pray?

Let me suggest that the psalms give us a *rhythm* for prayer. Hebrew poetry did not use rhyme or a specific meter like Greek or English poetry. Instead, it used a “rhythm of thought” to carry its message. Thus, it is natural to say the psalms provide a rhythm for the spiritual life as it unfolds its words.

Let’s look at Psalms 4 and 5 as examples. Psalm 4 is an evening psalm; psalm 5 a morning psalm. The Israelites timed a day from evening to morning (remember Genesis 1, “there was evening and morning, day one”). Peterson looks at these two psalms and says there is “grace embedded in the earth’s rotation” (61).

Psalm 4 – Prayer in the evening

- The evening prayer is a deliberate act of spirit. The day has unfolded, not always as we wanted. Issues arise, words are thrown out, some good, some bad. It’s a normal day. The alarm didn’t go off. One kid didn’t want to nap as usual. A client didn’t return a phone call. A part is backordered and won’t be available for a month. So, the psalm opens with a clamorous demand: “Answer me when I call, O God of my right values! / You have given me relief when I was in distress. / Be gracious to me and hear my prayer” (1).
- After following up with the contrasts of the day (2-7), the prayer ends with quiet calm – “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; / for you alone, O Yhwh, make me dwell in safety” (8). A start in loudness ends with trust in the Lord. How did the change come?
- The psalm revolves around a center (4-5) bracketed by contrasts. The first contrast lies between futility and providence – *futility* says, “O men of rank, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? / How long will you love vain words and seek after lies” (3)? The psalmist had a bad day. *Providence* says – “But know that the LORD has set apart the godly (the saint) for himself; / Yhwh hears when I call to him” (4).
- The second contrast comes in vv. 6-7, between those who are asking for what they don’t have, perhaps feeling entitled – “There are many who say, ‘Who will show us some good?’ / ‘Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!’” (6) – and those who are overwhelmed with what God has given – “You have put more joy in my heart / than they have when their grain and wine abound” (7). Wow, more joy than a bumper crop and perhaps even drunkenness!

- It is in the center portion that the definitive clarity of the day comes out (4-5). Six verbs mark the day – “be angry” and “do not sin” (4a), “ponder” in your own hearts on your beds and “be silent” (4b, reflect on the days ups-and-downs and your responses to them), “offer” right sacrifices (5a) and “trust” the LORD (5b). The sacrifices need not be those offered at the temple. They could be the reflections on your day or even yourself (Rom 12:1); the point is you must let go of the sacrifice and place your trust in the LORD who then determines it is right or not.
- Trust leads to the grace of sleep with peace and the knowledge that the Lord neither sleeps nor slumbers and works through the early hours of the day (overnight in our way of thinking).

Psalm 5 – Prayer in the morning

- Psalm 5 opens with the psalmist moaning and stretching as he begins the day with prayer (1-3). “Give ear to my words, O LORD” (1). Yhwh is “my King and my God” and it is “to you do I pray” (2). “O Yhwh, in the morning you hear my voice; / in the morning I arrange it for you and wait” (3, my translation). The ESV says, “in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you,” reading the “it” of the Hebrew as a “sacrifice.” I have chosen to read it as more open-ended, perhaps indicating listing or arranging all that must be done today. I prepare for action by thinking it through and then leaving it in the Lord’s hands. I would call this an “active passivity” – you still have to check off the list, do the things on it, but you do so watching how the Lord will work through the things you do.
- After all, evil may arise (4-6). The possibilities for evil always arise in the world – wickedness, boastfulness, lies, bloodthirstiness, and deceit. The Lord has nothing to do with those things. The prayer repeats these thoughts again in vv. 9-10.
- On the other hand, obedient action comes from relationship with an ever-present LORD and his willingness to lead us (7-8). Vv. 11-12 repeat the hopeful trust of relationship with the LORD – “But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; / let them ever sing for joy, / and spread your protection over them, / that those who love your name may exult in you. / For you bless the faithful, O LORD; / you cover him with favor as with a shield.”

- What a way to start the day! Verse 3 provides the center. We give up ownership and control when we arrange the day like a good sacrifice before the Lord. Thus, we wait and watch to see the hand of the Lord.
- It is like the “heap of witness” made when Laban caught up with Jacob after he had fled with his wives and livestock. Jacob called the heap Galeed and also Mizpah for Laban said, “The Lord *watch* between you and me” (Gen 31:49).

Concluding reflections

We can see the “grace embedded” in the rotation of the earth, the development of evening into day, the prayers in the evenings and in the mornings.

Do you end and begin your day with this kind of prayer? I confess it is hard to remember to do so. I get busy watching the television or reading the latest novel or brushing and flossing my teeth. I lay down with a thankful word to the Lord and a prayer for Barbie and her next day. Then the next thing I know I’m waking up at 6:00 am.

Try an experiment with me for the rest of September. Each evening read through Psalm 4. Each morning over coffee or breakfast read through Psalm 5. Perhaps read through this message again with some of the scripture reading. Make them your prayers to the Lord. Read slowly.

May the Lord grace your life through the rotation of the earth!