

The Psalms remind me of the ocean. Walking along the sandy beach, observing the surf and taking in its beauty, is one thing, but surfing the waves, contending with rip currents, and being thrown against the rocks is an altogether different experience. We can walk along the edge of the Psalms and remark on their beauty or we can plunge into their depth.

I knew I needed to have a better grasp of the Psalms so I set out to study each psalm one after the other. For years I have prayed and preached the Psalms. They were often my inspiration for a memorial service or a summer preaching series. I turned to the Psalms to bolster my prayer life or to give me words to express discouragement and heartache. For many years I used a memorized section of a psalm to call our congregation to worship. I'd say I valued the Psalms but I didn't really know the Psalms. My habit in the past was to read and pray the Psalms selectively, but this discipline of taking the Psalms in the order they come to us helped me to see the flow of the Psalms. This study led me to believe that the arrangement of the Psalms is in itself a form of spiritual direction. Many of the Psalms go together and they answer one another.

I won't bore you with all the commentaries I read (you'll find them in the bibliography). Among them were ancient voices, such as Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Matthew Henry, and Charles Spurgeon, along with contemporary voices, such as Walkie, Craigie, Goldingay, Ross, Kidner, and Allen. I benefitted from exegetical commentaries that tackled technical questions and pastoral commentaries that opened up my praying and pastoral imagination. Discovering in the Psalms their deep correspondence to life requires some discipline and devotion on our part. We may have trouble lining up the Psalms with our lives. It takes skill to sync life with the Psalms. We can memorize a favorite psalm, that's easy enough, but learning to pray the Psalms is more challenging.

Toward the end of my senior year at Wheaton College, four friends and I took a two day canoe trip down the Vermillion River in Illinois. None of us had ever been on the river before and we were using a Girl Scout guide book to navigate. We thought we had lined up the guide book with where we started on the river. The first day out the book warned of dangerous rapids, but when we came to rapids they were gentle, nothing to worry about. Then the book warned of a waterfall that we might need to portage around, but it too proved uneventful. The guide book indicated that the river was especially dangerous around an old factory, but we passed by what we thought was the old factory without incident. By now we were laughing at the Girl Scouts and their wimpy guide book. We were ridiculing its warnings and mocking its notes of caution. We ended our first day around a campfire thumping our male chests and trashing the Girl Scout guide book.

The next day we came to a set of rapids that was dangerous, followed by a waterfall steep enough to capsize two of our canoes, followed by an old factory, where the current and the rocks were so treacherous we had to portage. By now it was clear that we had lined up the guide book with the wrong section of the river. The Girl Scouts were right, after all. What they said was dangerous was truly dangerous. The guide book was right in every way. Where the river got serious, the guide book got serious. We were getting much better advice than we thought we were. Our

failure to line up the guide book with the river was our big mistake. My conclusion is this: sooner or later we will find ourselves in each and every psalm. But we have to live in the Psalms to discern these correlations and to make these connections.

Lining up the Psalms with life requires some skill, or should I say, applied knowledge. Expertise in exegesis is important, but there is more to praying the Psalms than word studies and grammar. The transition from essential scholarship to thoughtful spirituality involves a new orientation. In some cases, we have to unlearn our trained incapacity to pray the Psalms. We have to understand the exegetical meaning and the emotional impact of the Psalms if they are going to lead us in worship that is both heartfelt and truthful. My aim throughout this work is to encourage believers who take the Word seriously to pray and study the Psalms by integrating the work scholarship with insights into the wisdom of the Psalms. I hope this effort provides readily accessible personal and practical material for devotional and pastoral application. Each meditation is designed to help the reader navigate the meaning of the Psalm in the Psalter and to draw out its significance for following Christ.

In his book *Deceived by God? A Journey Through Suffering*, theologian John Feinberg honestly admits that his extensive study of the problem of evil did little to comfort him when his wife, Patricia, was diagnosed with Huntington's Disease. This genetically transmitted disease involves the premature deterioration of the brain. In seminary, Feinberg wrote his master of divinity thesis on Job. Later, he devoted his master of theology thesis to God's sovereignty and human freedom. Still absorbed in the problem of evil, he focused his doctoral dissertation on the subject.

Yet after all of those years of serious biblical and theological study, he felt as though he had no resource to help him deal with the devastating reality of his wife's life threatening illness. All of his intellectual work had missed his soul. "The truth is," Feinberg admits, "I couldn't figure it out. I had all the intellectual answers, but none of them made any difference in how I felt on the personal level. As a professor of theology, surely I should understand what God was doing in this situation. On the contrary, I began wondering if in fact I really understood anything at all about God. The emotional and psychological pain was unrelenting, and even devastating physical pain resulted from the stress. . . I was experiencing a religious crisis, and none of this information I had stored away seemed to matter in the least."¹

What makes Feinberg's book on pain especially worthwhile is that he has the courage to contrast his own spiritual helplessness with his wife's deeply internalized faith. Patricia describes her initial reaction to the bad news:

"I was extremely shocked when this disease was diagnosed. I knew that when physical problems come, one should thank God for his presence and strength in the midst of those problems, rather than becoming bitter. And I knew that I should do that whether I felt like it or not; so that's what I did on the way home in the car. I also knew 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which says, 'Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.' No matter what the circumstances,

¹ John S. Feinberg, *Deceived By God? A Journey Through Suffering* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 33-34.

God is still there, and he is in control of all that happens. He is faithful to his Word. That is reason for thanksgiving, and I continue to thank him each day.”²

One of the first things that Patricia did was to read through the Psalms. She wrote down every reference having to do with God’s strength in time of trouble. Psalm 46:1 was especially comforting: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” Through prayer, Patricia was able to hear the Word of God in her pain. She wrote, “God made that verse true in my life. I have confidence in his presence, even in the midst of this disease.”³ She found her voice in the Psalms. She was able to line up the Psalms with her life, finding in them a resource for living. Instead of being crushed by her terminal illness, she testified, “The Lord has given me such complete comfort that I wanted to find ways to share it with others.”⁴

Patricia Feinberg’s ability to process her experience through the Psalms started with a learned conviction. Her narrative was already being shaped by God’s redemptive story. She had a history with God and the people of God before this tragic turn of events. These spiritual disciplines do not happen automatically. They are nurtured over time. If she turned to the Psalms, as if it was in her second nature to do so, it was only because somewhere along the line, she was instructed and nurtured to think and act this way. The influence may have been subtle and indirect, but it grew out of her experience of the church. The Body of Christ plays a vital role in helping believers embrace the Psalms personally.

Lining up the Psalms with life requires an unselfish reading. Our first inclination is to ask how a psalm relates to me. But we need to check our individualistic bent and begin with what this psalm means for the people of God. The Psalms are relational and they are designed for corporate worship. Their interpretative and inspirational energy is from the community to the individual and not the individual to the community. The Psalms work in the bedroom and the study, but first they belong in the sanctuary. They are deeply personal, but they become personal in the context of the family of God. The Psalms are not individualistic solos. They are all community hymns issuing out of the congregation. The horizon of each psalm is salvation history. The focus is the body of Christ. Praying the Psalms in worship is an exercise in solidarity with the people of God through time and throughout the world.

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them in the light of the global church. We have to get out of suburbia and into salvation history in order to understand them. Our ideas about what is relevant are often too narrow and selfish. The global church gives us the necessary vantage point from which to understand and pray the Psalms. In other words, the Psalms fit the mission of God far better than our agenda. And one reason churches are sometimes not very excited about the Psalms is because their vision clashes with the Psalms. Psalm 50 begins,

“The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth. Our

² Ibid., 135.

³ Ibid., 137.

⁴ Ibid., 137.

God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages.”

We can't very well pray this and live quiet lives of desperation. The Psalms keep God's truths before us and our trivial pursuits in perspective. Pray the Psalms and the risk of reducing life to petty preoccupations and escapist obsessions will shrink. Our capacity for poise and resilience will increase as we pray Psalm 67 from the heart: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all the nations. May the peoples praise you, God; may all peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth. May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you” (Ps 67:1-5).

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them on behalf of the household of faith. Left to ourselves and our own interests our world shrinks. But learning to pray the Psalms for the body of believers deepens our empathy for those in pain and expands our capacity for praise. The Psalms put an end to our superficial god-talk and invite our participation in a struggle that is much bigger than ourselves.

At the age of twenty-five, Matthew Henry (1662-1714) became the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Chester, England. He began his ministry by teaching on the First Psalm at a Thursday Bible study. For the next twenty-five years Henry devoted himself and his congregation to a thorough exposition of the Psalms in that Thursday Bible study. Over the course of his ministry they went through the entire book five times, which may “explain the richness of his commentary on the Psalms in his famous *Exposition of the Whole Bible*.⁵

When I was teaching in Toronto I led a Wednesday night prayer meeting in the Psalms in a small Baptist Church. I gave a fifteen minute meditation on a psalm, followed by a time of prayer. We prayed the psalm on behalf of our people, our missionaries, and our world. This pattern seemed to prove helpful. We worked our way into the Psalms and they began to shape our prayers. For the last several years I have led a Monday morning Psalm study. Most of our group are retirees and members of an Episcopal church. Our oldest member is a ninety-three year old geneticist. We take the Word of God seriously and its fair to say our love for the Psalms is growing.

The simple rhythm of taking a psalm a week means that we pray and study the neglected Psalms, even the raw, negative ones that we often skip or censor. We pray them all, refusing to perform “psalmectomies.”⁶ It has been my experience that whenever a group of believers takes the Psalms seriously like this they begin to resonate with them and they begin to use them as a resource, as a tool for being and becoming, as a way of answering God.

On any given Sunday we are with people going through their deepest darkest valley. The range of afflictions is great: abuse, adultery, anorexia, alcoholism, bereavement, bankruptcy, divorce,

⁵ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol 5. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004. 32.

⁶ Peterson, *Answering God*, 98.

delinquency, malignancies, mental illnesses, and moral failures of all kinds. Evil is the enemy prayed against in the Psalms and there is plenty of enemy talk in the Psalms. We pray out our hate, leaving vengeance to God. The thin veneer of our suburban niceness is exposed. By naming the enemy, the Psalms lay bare the harsh realities confronting the people of God. The Psalms are an antidote to boring, placid prayers. All this enemy talk triggers our adrenaline. We are in a spiritual combat zone, but we are not alone and we are under orders.

On any given Sunday we are also with people experiencing their greatest joy. The range of blessings is great: health, holiness, happiness, love, integrity, social justice, friendship, forgiveness, reconciliation, marriage, meaningful work, table grace, adventure, and blessings of all kinds. Salvation is all encompassing. We direct our prayers of adoration and thanksgiving to the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our gratitude has the worthiest object of worship. Psalm 100 pulsates with praise:

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”

Lining up the Psalms with life means praying them in the light of Christ. Before the Psalms were the Church’s prayer book, they were prayed by Jesus. We use the same tools Jesus used to pray to the Father. He grew up on these prayers. They shaped his messianic self-understanding, even as they came to shape the Church’s understanding of Jesus.

On the road to Emmaus following the resurrection, Jesus stressed that everything written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. We are invited by the Lord himself to read the Psalms christologically (Luke 24:44). Jesus and the Heavenly Father are one. Jesus is the Rock of refuge and that great Shepherd of the sheep. Jesus is the One of whom it is said, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” (Ps 2:7), and “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (Ps 110:1). The church came to recognize Jesus as the psalmist. The Son of David is the author of the Psalms—the primary person of prayer. What David prayed figuratively, “They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst,” found its literal fulfillment in the passion of Christ (Ps 69:21).

The Psalms belong to Jesus, whose external history establishes the ultimate revelational and emotional connection to the Psalms. In Christ, the Psalms find, what T. S. Eliot called the *objective correlative*, that is, the true correlation between event and emotion, object and person.⁷ David’s description of extreme abandonment and persecution in Psalm 22 goes well beyond his actual circumstances, but they are most accurate for Jesus, whose God-forsaken experience on the cross, because of our sin, exceeds even the most powerful poetic expression. The words, “My

⁷ James W. Sire, *Praying the Psalms of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 31.

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” belong first and last to Jesus (Ps 22:1). These emotionally charged words are linked to the meaning of the atonement. The pivotal turning point in the Psalm comes when David abruptly moves from agony to ecstasy (Ps 22:22-31). Thus, the whole psalm finds its correlation in Christ, from cruciform-death to empty-tomb Resurrection.

In addition to Christ’s *vicarious sacrifice*, receiving in himself the penalty of our sins and giving us his righteousness, the Psalms offer us Christ’s *vicarious spirituality*. We are Christ-dependent, not only for our righteousness, but in our spirituality. In the Psalms, Christ leads us in prayer, with a passion and intensity well beyond our experience. The Spirit of Christ prays the Psalms on our behalf. We know the Psalms lie behind these wordless groans when the Spirit helps us in our weakness, interceding for God’s people in accordance with the will of God (Rom 8:26-27).

What is true in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper is also true in praying the Psalms: it is not the passion we bring to worship, but the passion we receive in worship that is most important. There is no emotional prerequisite to praying the Psalms. We are relieved of the burden of working up our feelings. The passion to be focused upon is not ours, but Christ’s. If we let Christ lead us in prayer, we will learn how to pray.

The Psalms are not cut-flower prayers. They are real. Their down-to-earth honesty triggers our adrenaline. The Psalms resist obsequious piety and over-spiritualized religiosity. There is nothing falsetto or fake about them. Pulsating praise and heart-wrenching pain captures the elemental human voice of the Psalms. The Psalms challenge our false notions of holiness by showing us what it means to be human. “The Psalms act as good psychologists” causing us to deal with our anger, shame, guilt, and hate.⁸ “The 150 psalms present a mosaic of spiritual therapy in process.” Philip Yancey continues, “Such stewing of emotions, which I once saw as hopeless disarray, I now see as a sign of health.”⁹

Finally, lining up the Psalms with life is deeply personal. The full range of the Psalms corresponds with the fullness of our life experiences. The highs and lows, the good times and bad, the mundane and the momentous, the ordinary and the extraordinary, are all to be found in the depth and breadth of the Psalms. We have malignancy psalms, birth psalms, wedding psalms, singleness psalms, graduation psalms, bereavement psalms, victory psalms, and many more. These psalms are different for different people, but there is a psalm for every life phase and every experience. When my mother prayed the Psalms on behalf of others she often put their name and the date in the margins next to a particular psalm. Both naming and dating were important because the psalm was for that particular person and time. The Psalms put life in perspective. Psalm 34 was my father’s psalm when he was dying from cancer: “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:17-18).

We embrace the Psalms because they are God’s answer to us and our answer to God. The Psalms hold up both sides of the conversation. We hear the voice of God in the Psalms and we discover

⁸ Norris, “Why the Psalms Scare Us,” 21

⁹ Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 122.

our own voice—God’s will and our will in dialogue. The Psalms are instruments of grace, tools of being and becoming, that guide us in true spirituality. By praying the Psalms, we learn what it is to be both human and holy in the presence of God. Their rhythmic arrangement, juxtaposing praise and pain, hate and love, saves us from shallow optimism and ornamental spirituality. Through the Psalms we gain a true understanding of ourselves and we enter into solidarity with the Body of Christ. In order to make the Psalms our own, we learn to pray the Psalms on behalf of others—the global church and the household of faith. We pray the Psalms in the light of Christ and in sync with our personal experience.

Unselfish skill is required to line up the Psalms with life, to discover the deep correspondence between God’s will and the human condition. And perhaps some courage is needed as well. As I said earlier, the Psalms remind me of the ocean. We can survey the Psalms from a safe distance or we can dive in. Our son Andrew is an ocean lifeguard in Dominical, Costa Rica. He routinely surfs with dolphins and rescues unsuspecting tourists from dangerous rip-currents. He contends with barracudas, stingrays, and sharks, but his greatest challenge are the tourists. They think of the ocean as a big swimming pool, and they are surprised to learn that the ocean is teeming with wild life and energy. Andrew has remarked, “If they actually knew what was in the ocean, they would never get in.” Thankfully we are not spiritual tourists, dipping our toes in the Psalms, fearful of what lies below the surface, but sojourners diving into the Psalms, identifying with their raw nature, exploring their depths, and praying as Jesus prayed.

“Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves
and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs his love,
at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life”

Psalm 42:7-8