



God's Story Our Mission Week 7: Worship for Mission Part 2- the Psalms

Guide for Facilitators and Participants

This week we are approaching our group discussion a little differently. We are going to deep dive into how to engage with the Psalms. This week, everyone will take away a copy of the lesson as well our discussion questions, which can be used on any Psalm you return to in personal study.

Why are the Psalms important for worship and our understanding of mission? The 4th century Christian theologian Athanasius of Alexandria in his [Letter to Marcellinus](#), spells out some important insights (insights shared and echoed by Christians such as Augustine, Luther and Calvin, just to name a few) for reading the Psalms that still holds true today. First, Athanasius writes, that while all the books of the bible are important and are inspired by God's Holy Spirit for our edification, the Psalms hold out a special grace as it were. This is the case, because instead of narrating the story of God and his people where the reader is observing as a spectator in a sense (though by no means an unbiased spectator) the Psalms invite the reader to adopt the first person perspective of God's people in prayer and worship. This allows us as God's people to actually pray and sing the story of God as if we were imbedded in the story we are learning in scripture. He goes on to say that by taking on the voice of the psalmists, the Psalms as a whole provide a mirror and medicine for our life worship. Using the words of psalms as our very own prayers and acts of worship, we are given voice to the full contours of the life of faith with its highs of joy and praise but also with its lows of lamentation and frustration, which nevertheless express true faith in God.

As a book of poetry and songs used in worship, the Psalms are remarkably diverse in its mood and genre. There are psalms that are dominated by praise and joy. There are psalms that are dominated by individual or communal lamentation and grief and even give voice to complaints. There is everything in

between in the Psalms. Being able to recognize these moods are important for our use of the Psalms. These Psalms were composed in the real historical circumstances of Israel's life with God. Yet, even as the Psalms call us to understand the history in which they are written, in a sense, the Psalms transcend such history in order to be used by all of God's people when the situation calls for it.

Yet, even as we recognize this important feature of the Psalms, they are still written from a particular set of perspectives. We may call these the voices, or the speakers of the psalms. Even as we use the psalms as our own prayers, we still want to be mindful that we are taking on a certain voice as we do this. First and foremost, within its Old Testament perspective we are taking on the voice of David as the King of Israel. The book of Psalms has a particular association with David as he is attributed as author to roughly half of the psalms in the book. Even many of the Psalms that are not attributed to him are either written for the messiah of Israel or from the messiah's perspective. But the king never just speaks for himself. As messiah the king also represents the people's plight and relationship to God. As the king praises God or laments to God, so Israel as a whole can use such words in their own communal worship. But in addition to these voices and perspectives, the Psalms also are sung by the New Testament Christian Church. 115 Psalms are quotes or alluded to in the New Testament with 326 citations! The New Testament Christian community had a special understanding of the Psalms as the book that anticipates the Gospel action of God in Jesus and in the Christian Church. As inheritors of all of God's promises with Israel, the Christian Church has the book of the Psalms as its prayer book as well that gives voice to its own experience of the Gospel. Finally though, Jesus is the ultimate speaker or subject matter of the Psalms. Jesus himself in the Gospels frequently uses the Psalms to give voice to what his ministry is about or his experience as the true messiah of Israel. Jesus, par excellence, is God's unique incarnate Son who can pray the words of Psalm 2. Jesus is David's greater son who uses the words of 110 to show his authority over Israel and David himself. These are just a few examples which demonstrate that Jesus himself uses the voice of the Psalmist as his own.

For all these reasons, the Psalms should become a vital book for Christians as we sing through our mission as God's people. By taking on voices of the speakers in the Psalm we can be honest about what our living out our mission looks like. As we pray the laments of God's people who are complaining of opposition to God's kingdom, we should come to recognize that participating in God's mission while living in a world broken by sin does not come without real struggles of faith. Yet even as we pray honestly through the hardships of mission, we are given words to pray that still redirect us back to God's promise of victory. We are given words that recall God's great saving acts so that we can call upon God to act in a saving way for the present and in the future. We are given words of repentance when we sin as God's people and we are given words of thanksgiving when we receive the grace of God's forgiveness and love. Through such honesty we are inviting others, even those outside the faith, to observe how rich and multidimensional our Christian prayer life and worship really is since we have a God who is accessible to us in all human experience. Indeed, God became human in Jesus and took on our entire human plight, while praying these Psalms himself to give us these words as a special treasure and perspective as we join God in his mission for the world!

Group Discussion

Pick a psalm as a group and ask the following questions for discussion as you read:

What is the primary characteristic of this Psalm? What is its mood? How does making this identification help us know how to use it?

In what does this psalm inform our intellect about God? In what way does this psalm give expression to our emotional experience with God? In what way does this psalm mold our wills towards a life with God?

How can you identify the speaker as the king of Israel? How can you identify the speaker as God's people? How can you identify the speaker as Jesus?

How does learning to identify with the speaker of the psalms help us to know our mission as God's people?

How does learning to pray all the different moods and genres of the psalms help us to experience God's mission in a more honest way?

What is the difference in our spiritual life together as God's people between knowing God's story and praying the story through the psalms?

For Next Time:

Skim through the book of Daniel.