

Praying with the Psalms

Leaders Guide



*But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

Psalm 1:2

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Psalms

Praying with the Psalms

Introduction Part I

History

Historically, the Gospel narratives and the Psalms have been the two greatest sources for Christian meditation and contemplation in the Bible. The Psalter functioned as the Jewish “Common Prayer” book. Used in synagogues and private worship, it was Jesus’ “common prayer” book.

During the monastic period, the Psalms were read, recited, and prayed in continuous cycles. The famous rule of St. Benedict moves the participant through the whole Psalter in one week. The *Book of Common Prayer* (1552, revised 1662) of the Church of England provides a way to pray through or recite the whole Psalter in a month, in morning and evening common prayer. Calvin and the Reformed churches put the Psalms in metrical verse and set them to music for congregational song. In his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin wrote, “The design of the Holy Spirit [was]... to deliver the church a common form of prayer.”

Today, the Psalms have fallen into disuse for several reasons. First, there are the difficult passages (especially for modern sensibilities) seeking retribution on enemies, and many places of despondence. Second, more recent interpreters have been afraid to interpret the Psalter as referring to Christ, his person and work, even though Christ himself did so! Third, it takes some theological literacy to navigate the Psalms, and that literacy is no longer widespread. Finally, the Psalms are poetry that takes time to penetrate, while we live in a fast-paced culture with little time for reflection.

Need

Why should we root our prayer life deeply in the psalms and prayers of the Bible?

The Psalms teach us to pray through imitation and response

We do not choose God; God chooses us (John 15:16). *Everything* we do toward God is a response to God’s initiative. Prayer, therefore, is primarily *answering* speech. ¹ In 2 Samuel 7, God sent David a prophetic word (vv. 4-16) and David then responded with a prayer, saying, literally: “O Sovereign LORD, you have spoken... so your servant has found courage to offer you this prayer” (vv. 19, 27). God’s speech *creates* real prayer. Real prayer is always an answer to God’s revelation. The Psalms are both prayer *and* revelation about God — the perfect soil for learning prayer.

Essential to the practice of prayer is to fully realize this secondary quality. ...The first word is God’s word. [We are] never the first word, never the primary word... This massive, overwhelming *previousness* of God’s speech to our prayers, however obvious it is in Scripture, is not immediately obvious to us simply because we are so much more aware of ourselves than we are of God.

...Our personal experience in acquiring language is congruent with the biblical witness and provides an accessible... laboratory for verifying [this]. Because we learned language so early in our lives we have no clear memory of the process [and generally would "remember" that we took the initiative in beginning to speak]. But by observing our own children... we... confirm the obvious: language is spoken into us; we learn language by being spoken to. We are plunged at birth into a sea of language. ...Then slowly, syllable by syllable, we acquire the capacity to answer: mama, papa, bottle, blanket, yes, no. Not one of these words was a first word.

...Question: Where then can we go to learn our language as it develops into maturity, as it answers God? Answer: The Psalms. The great and sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to learn... to pray. ²

The Psalms take us deep into our own hearts

They do so a thousand times faster than we would ever go if left to ourselves. The Psalms also force us to deal with deep suffering and pain before we arrive there. They force us to look at praise and thanksgiving when we don't feel them at all. All exercise is "against the grain" and so the Psalms pull and push us emotionally beyond our normal capacities.

[The Psalms] are God's gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive (not patched together from emotional fragments scattered around that we chance upon) and honest (not a series of more or less sincere verbal poses that we think might please our Lord). ...[If] we apprentice ourselves to these masters, acquiring facility by using the tools, ...we become more and more ourselves. If we are willfully ignorant of the Psalms, we are not thereby excluded from praying, but we will have to hack our way through formidable country by trial and error and with inferior tools. ³

The Psalms force us to deal with God as he is

This is the most important reason of all. Eugene Peterson explains:

In a world of prayers that indulge the religious ego and cultivate passionate longings, the Psalms stand out with a kind of angular austerity. ...Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God that we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us, and to everything that he speaks to us... The Psalms... train us in that conversation. [We are] wrestled into obedience, subjected to the strenuous realities of living by faith in the God who reveals himself to us... There is a difference between praying to an unknown God whom we hope to discover in our praying, and praying to a known God, revealed through Israel and Jesus Christ, who speaks our language. In the first, we indulge our appetite for religious fulfillment; in the second we practice obedient faith. The first is a lot more fun, the second is a lot more important. What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God.

- 1. Choose one (or more) psalms and read for comprehension in the NIV.**

- 2. Pray each psalm several times.**
 - (a) First, simply pray some of the petitions/statements to God, very close to the language in the psalm, but also somewhat in your own words. (See verses 17-18 below.)

 - (b) Next, turn some of the statements into petitions to God. This will mean that even more of the prayer will be in your own words. (See verses 1-2 below.)

 - (c) Do some praising, repenting, and supplication on the basis of some of the psalm's statements. This will be completely in your own words. (See verse 7 below.)

- 3. Move on to the next psalm (if you choose more than one) and do the same thing.**

GROUP EXERCISE

- 1. Read Psalm 116 aloud in the NIV.**

- 2. Pray the psalm several times with different group members taking turns.**
 - (a) First, simply pray some of the petitions/statements to God, very close to the language in the psalm, but also somewhat in your own words. For example, verses 17-18 might sound something like this:**
 - v. 17: I will sacrifice thank offerings to you, and call on your name, O Lord.

 - v. 18: I will live a life consistent with my baptism, with my membership in your church. I won't do this on my own, but in the community of your people.

(b) Next, turn some of the statements into petitions to God. This will mean that even more of the prayer will be in your own words. For example, verses 1-2 might sound something like this:

v. 1: I love you Lord, for when I asked for mercy, you gave it to me. Lord, you have done it again and again.

v. 2: And for that, Lord, I will never stop depending on you — never. There's nowhere else I can go; nowhere else I should go.

(c) Do some praising, repenting, and supplication on the basis of some of the psalm's statements. This will be completely in your own words. For example, verse 7 might sound something like this:

v. 7: Oh, Lord, my heart does not rest in your goodness, it is not consoled deeply by your grace. It is too restless. Help me to know you. Let your goodness be so real to my heart that it is completely at rest.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), p. 32.

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, pp. 32-35.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 3-4.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God*, pp. 5-6, 14-15, 20.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 157.

⁶ See Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), chapter 4.

Psalms

Meditation I

Study 1 | Psalm 1

INTRODUCTION

The word “meditate” is used often in the Psalms. One Hebrew word means literally to “mutter” or to “talk to oneself.” This refers to the fact that meditation entails both focused attention and personal application. The other word means to “muse” or “ponder.” In Psalm 77:12 and 143:5, we are called to meditate on the works of God in nature and history. In Psalm 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, and 148, we are exhorted to meditate on God’s Word, his verbal revelation. In Psalm 63:6, the psalmist simply meditates “on thee.” Clearly, many of the Psalms are themselves extended meditations. What is meditative prayer? Or what is the meditation that leads to deepening prayer?

PSALM 1

1. What can you learn about meditation from verse 2?

First, we see that the object or basis for meditation is “the law of the Lord,” the Word of God. There are many other things that people may and should meditate upon. But in Psalm 1, the primary concern is meditation on Scripture.

Second, we see that “delighting” in the law of the Lord is closely associated with meditation. If we are honest, we will admit that we do not usually think of the words “delight” and “law” in the same sentence. But this shows us at least two things about meditation. (a) Meditation involves *not just the head, but the heart*. “*Delight in the law*” is not simply intellectual study, but an internal relishing and cherishing of the truth. (b) Meditation involves *not just thinking but acting*. “*Delight in the law*” is not simply a matter of noticing truths and principles. You only “delight in the law” if you love having God tell you what to do! Meditation, then, means very hard thinking: “How does this apply to me? How does this change me? How does this affect me? How does it make me different?”

Third, we see in the phrase “day and night” the consistency and discipline of meditation. This is not just a spontaneous epiphany that happens to us. It is something we decide to do. It must happen regularly, relentlessly. It is something you do whether you feel like it or not.

Note: In his study of Psalm 1, Eugene Peterson brings out the fact that the original meaning of the Hebrew word used here for “law” — *torah* — comes from a verb that means “to throw something to hit its mark, as in a javelin.”¹ That is highly significant. The Scriptures are not words we simply study as if for an exam, unlocking information to use as we will. These are energies hurled at our heart. God’s words are designed to penetrate, wound, remove, heal, and infuse us. In the New Testament we read that the Word of God is “alive and

active... a sword" (Heb. 4:12). This is quite important practically. This realization is necessary for meditation: that his word is *torah*, living truth aimed to penetrate. Sometimes that very thought spontaneously moves us into meditation and prayer.

2. What is meditation contrasted with in verse 1? What does that teach you about meditation? (Hint: what is the significance of the progression from "walk" to "stand" to "sit"?)

The first thing this contrast teaches us is that meditation leads to blessedness! There are so many contrasting clauses in this first sentence (which stretches across the first two verses) that we often miss the point. If we look only at its beginning and end, it becomes clear: "Blessed is the man who... meditates day and night." Once we remove all the contrasts and the qualifiers, we see the point: If you want "blessedness," you must meditate. The word "blessed" in Hebrew means far more than just "happy." It refers to complete peace and fullness of life, total well-being — an enormous promise.

Second, we learn what we could see implicitly before: that meditation is not just an intellectual exercise, but the basis for our whole way of life. The life of a godly man in verse 2, based on meditation on God's law, is contrasted with the life of the ungodly man in verse 1. Notice, however, that even an *ungodly* life is also based on some form of "meditation." It begins with "walking in the counsel of the ungodly." "Counsel" refers to a form of wisdom and thinking. We will either be meditating and walking in God's wisdom or meditating and walking in worldly, human wisdom. What shapes your thinking ("counsel") shapes your behavior ("way") and your attitude and heart ("scoffers").

Thus we must always consider what we are listening to and meditating on in our heart of hearts. We will naturally meditate on the "counsel of the wicked" or we will deliberately make ourselves meditate on the law of the Lord. There are no other alternatives.

In summary: in verses 1-2, our blessedness or lack thereof depends on what we are meditating on in our heart of hearts.

3. How are verses 3-5 an example of meditation? (a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness. (b) How is a tree like a meditating person? (c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?

One of the most fascinating things about this psalm is the way it actually does a meditation *on* meditation.

(a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness.

Verses 3 through 5 are an extended consideration of the contrast between the ungodly life and the godly life, much like “chaff” contrasts with a tree. [Some of us urbanites need to recall that chaff is the seed covering, husk, and other debris that separate from the more valuable grain during threshing. In ancient times, the grain and the chaff were thrown into the air together, allowing the wind to blow away the useless — and lighter — chaff, leaving the heavier grain to fall back to earth to be gathered for planting or food.] What does this metaphor-contrast tell us? (1) A tree is useful but chaff is useless, so ungodliness is of no profit. (2) A tree is stable and lasting, while chaff is blown about and blown away. So ungodliness leads to instability and all its gains are temporary. (3) A tree bears fruit; thus it gives life to people and grows more trees. Chaff cannot bring forth any new life. Nor can it feed anyone; it has no nutritional value. So godliness matures, nurtures, and bears life, while ungodliness leaves you empty, hungry, unsatisfied, and starving.

(b) How is a tree like a meditating person?

Verse 3 begins, “he is like.” Who is “he”? The man who meditates on the law day and night (v. 2). Therefore, the tree in verse 3 is an extended meditation on the one who meditates. What do we learn? Ironically, as soon as we begin to answer the question, we are beginning to meditate!

- (1) Meditation takes time, like a tree putting roots down. Trees don’t grow overnight!
- (2) Meditation leads to depth and stability. The deeper one’s “roots” in meditation, the less likely that a windstorm will blow you over.
- (3) Meditation is looking at the Word of God like a thirsty tree looks at water. This shows us that meditation goes beyond the intellectual. It is a spiritual “tasting” of Scripture, delighting in it, sensing the sweetness, thanking God and praising God for what you see. It is also spiritually “digesting” Scripture, applying it, thinking about how it affects you, describes you, and guides you in the most practical way. Meditation also helps you draw strength from Scripture, letting it give you hope, using it to remember how loved you are.

(4) Meditation will always lead to character growth — to fruit. It is not just a way to feel close to God. Real meditation changes the heart permanently into a heart of love, joy, peace, patience, humility, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). As Derek Kidner observes, “The tree is no mere channel, piping the water unchanged from one place to another, but a living organism which absorbs it, to produce in due course something new and delightful, proper to its kind and to its time.”²

(5) Meditation leads to stability, but not immunity from suffering and dryness. This tree only bears fruit “in season,” though “its leaf does not wither.” This means that meditation will lead to stability. A meditating person is an evergreen! Yet we must not always expect meditation to lead to uniform experiences of joy and love. There are “seasons” for great delight (springtime blossoms?) and for wisdom and maturity (summer fruit?). It means there are also spiritual winter times, when we don’t feel God close, though our roots may still be firmly in his truth. “The promised immunity of the *leaf* from withering is not independence from the rhythm of the seasons... but freedom from the crippling damage of drought.”³ Only in light of the balance of this metaphor can we understand the last line of verse 3. When the psalmist says, “Whatever he does prospers,” he does not mean that “he reaches every goal” or “he is always successful.” Rather, it means something like this: “A meditating person will always grow. Sometimes it is growth internally through suffering (as in winter) and sometimes it is externally through success (as in springtime). But you will always grow and prosper!”

(c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?

Meditation has a lot to do with the imagination. You are trying to grasp how truth really *affects* you. There is no better way than to create an image in your mind, for an image helps you make an abstract truth more concrete to your understanding and more gripping to your heart. Someone once defined meditation as “the mind descending into the heart.”

4. What do verses 5-6 promise? How does this result from a life of meditation?

Verse 5 gives us the chilling interpretation of the “chaff” metaphor. Just as the chaff is blown away into oblivion by the wind, so the wicked will be blown away by the presence of God on judgment day. By inference, we are being told that the one who meditates on the law of the Lord can be confident of “standing” on that day. Verse 6 tells us that the Lord “watches over” us, a word that means he comes close and cares for us. We will not have to be afraid of what will happen when we stand before God. We can have assurance that we will stand in the judgment.

- 6. List any ways that (a) Jesus Christ sheds light on Psalm 1, and (b) Psalm 1 sheds light on the person and work of Jesus Christ.**