

SUMMER CLASSICS
WISDOM FOR LIVING:
THE PSALMS
(1) WISDOM AND WORSHIP

1 Chronicles 16:7-10

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SCRIPTURE

Then on that day David first appointed the singing of praises to the LORD by Asaph and his kindred. {8} O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. {9} Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wonderful works. {10} Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice (1 Chronicles 16:7-10 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

If we want to understand the Bible we need to know something about how the Bible was written. Some of the books of the Bible are known as the Books of Wisdom. They include: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs in the Old Testament, and the Letter of James in the New.

The purpose of Wisdom literature is not academic but practical. It tries to teach people how to make good choices in life. Consequently, many of the wise sayings from the ancient Near East sound alike. But the Wisdom Books of the Bible are unique in recognizing that true wisdom starts and ends with God.

Today we are going to consider Wisdom and Worship in the Psalms.

King David was known as the “Sweet Psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam 23:1 KJV). When he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem he initiated a music ministry that made an indelible mark on the prayer and worship life of the People of God. This eventually resulted in the Book of Psalms where nearly half of the psalms are attributed to David, and most of the rest composed during or after the Babylonian Captivity (Exile). The word “psalm” is taken from the Greek translation of the Old Testament. If we were to translate directly from the Hebrew title of the book it would be the “Songs of Praise.”

Most Wisdom literature was written in poetic form. But Hebrew poetry does not rhyme by sound like English poetry, but rhymes by thought. This is called parallelism. It could be identical thoughts:

My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding (49:3 NRSV).

Or opposing thoughts:

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,
but the righteous are generous and keep giving (37:21 NRSV).

Or a combination:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity! (133:1 NRSV).

A wide range of emotions are expressed in the psalms as the writers bared their souls to God and others. Some of the psalms are inspiring. Some are depressing. But all are real. It is important that we recognize, as C. S. Lewis did, that “the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung, not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons” (C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms). The aim of the psalms is not so much to teach us as reach us.

Strictly speaking, the Book of Psalms is not a Wisdom Book but many of the psalms within it are written in a Wisdom style including the first one. Both Psalms and Proverbs proclaim, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps 11;10; Prov 1:7; 9:10). What the Book of Psalms does is prepare us emotionally to make wise choices about prayer and worship. It does this by helping us overcome whatever would keep our hearts from seeking the Lord.

1. THE PSALMS HELP OUR HEARTS OVERCOME DISTRACTION.

Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but who delight in the law of the LORD and meditate on his law day and night (Psalm 1:1-2 TNIV).

We will be distracted if we use prayer and worship as a way to earn God’s favor. The Bible refers to this as “works righteousness” (Titus 3:5; see also Gal 2:16) and it says it does not work. Paul writes:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast”

(Eph 2:8-9 NRSV).

There is nothing we can do to put God in our debt. It does not matter how often we pray or go to church, we can never put God into a position where he owes us something.

Too often when we pray we are like the chauvinistic husband who has decided to do some barbecuing. When such a man declares he will BBQ the following chain of events take place:

- 1) The woman goes to the store and buys everything.
- 2) The woman makes the salad, vegetables, and dessert.
- 3) The woman prepares the meat for cooking, places it on a tray along with the necessary cooking utensils and sauces, and takes it to the man, who is lounging beside the grill, liquid refreshment in hand.
- 4) The man places the meat on the grill.
- 5) The woman goes inside to organize the plates and cutlery.
- 6) The woman comes out to tell the man that the meat is burning. He thanks her and asks if she will bring another liquid refreshment while he deals with the situation.
- 7) The man takes the meat off the grill and hands it to the woman.
- 8) The woman prepares the plates and brings them to the table.
- 9) After eating, the woman clears the table and does the dishes.
- 10) Everyone praises the man and thanks him for his cooking efforts.
- 11) The man asks the woman how she enjoyed her night off!

How would you feel if you were that woman? I wonder if God ever feels like that? We attend church more than two Sundays in a row and we think we have done God a great favor. Consequently, we think God should be duly appreciative of our efforts. But if this is what we expect then we will often be disappointed. Prayer is not a work to earn something but an experience of grace whereby we respond to the One who not only created us but also loves us, in spite of ourselves.

Hebrew has many words that can be translated as “blessed.” Here in verse 1 it means “undeserved happiness.” In modern vernacular we would say, “lucky.” A lucky person is one who has something good happen to them but they did not deserve it. That is the essence of this word “blessed.” It is an undeserved happiness. It is an outpouring of God’s love and Spirit. And the appropriate response to such a joyous gift is to thank God by trying to live a life that pleases him.

2. THE PSALMS HELP OUR HEARTS OVERCOME INTIMIDATION.

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the LORD and against his anointed, saying, "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles" (Psalm 2:1-3 TNIV).

Newspapers and online blogs are filled with stories about conspiracies: Who really shot JFK or Martin Luther King, Jr.? Are there aliens from outer space living in New Mexico? Is Elvis still alive and, after extensive plastic surgery, now performing in Branson, Missouri?

But the Psalmist was talking about plots and conspiracies against God. This refers to people, especially those of worldly influence, who pursue ambitious projects and worldly lusts as if God did not exist. They would break the "chains" of conscience, and throw off the "shackles" of God's commandments.

Notice the words "in vain." The Psalmist believed these plots and conspiracies were meaningless plans and empty threats. It is not possible for the creature to overcome the Creator.

And how does God react to all of this?

The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them (2:4 TNIV).

God thinks its pretty funny stuff. The so-called influential of this world come across as a Vaudeville comedy act.

Over and against the grumblings of the world is a laughing God who does not take the rantings of the world seriously. It would be like Lichtenstein, a Central European nation of 30, 000 and no standing army, declaring war on the United States. Or a fly saying to an elephant, "I haven't decided what to make of you, yet." These are not the sort of things one can take seriously. God is rolling in the aisle (so to speak).

We know from the Gospel of John that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. It does not tell us what happened to Lazarus after this event. Eugene O'Neil wrote a play entitled, "Lazarus Laughs." It follows Lazarus after he leaves the tomb and Jesus has left the scene. As the play's title suggests, after rising from the dead, O'Neil's Lazarus laughs - indeed, laughs all the time. This annoys his enemies who try to intimidate him into being quiet. But Lazarus is unafraid. For he knows he has faced the worst the world has to offer, death, and death lost.

This is the idea behind Psalm 2. So when you pray, do not be intimidated by the threats of this world. Laugh with God and be unafraid.

3. THE PSALMS HELP OUR HEARTS OVERCOME AGITATION.

Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked (Psalm 3:7 TNIV).

Psalm 3 is the first real prayer in the Psalms. But Psalm 3 is not the kind of prayer that one would think to use to teach someone to pray. It is not a textbook prayer. It is not a generic prayer. It is not a simplified prayer. It's not even a particularly nice prayer. But it is a real prayer and therein lies its advantage.

Psalm 3 comes to us from the story of David. David's son Absalom staged a palace coup d'état. David had to flee for his life to the wilderness. Civil war broke out. The forces loyal to David fought against the forces loyal to Absalom. David regained his throne but at a terrible price - the death of his son (You can read the full account in 2 Samuel 15ff.).

The prayer of Psalm 3 flows out of that gritty, real life situation. It is noisy, dirty and awkward - just like real life. Each of us is in the midst of a story, a real life situation. It may not be quite what David went through but it may well involve fear or conflict, love and betrayal, pain or grief. Our prayers need to flow out of these real life situations.

The tendency in religious circles is to sanitize our prayers and remove the dirt, the noise, and the awkwardness. But if we do that, our prayers become superficial and sound like the inside of a greeting card. Real prayers come from real stories.

Most of the psalms express some form of agitation such as anger, confusion, grief and despair. This should tell us something. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to think such things are excuses for not seeking God.

A religious woman was constantly nagging her young daughter-in-law and mother of four, about prayer. "You got to get alone with God, girl, you just got to get alone with God," she would say. Finally, the daughter-in-law could take it no longer and she snapped, "Look, Mom, quit telling me to get alone with God. I have four pre-schoolers. I can't even get alone in the bathroom!"

If you are waiting for the ideal circumstances in order to pray, then you will never pray. Real prayer flows out of real life circumstances. It is a candid conversation with God while driving your car, fighting the flu, grieving a loved one, working a business deal and changing a stinky diaper. And the Psalms are our allies in overcoming whatever

would keep us from seeking God.

CONCLUSION

Over the centuries, Christians have used a three-fold pattern for a life of prayer:

- The first part is Worship. One day in seven the community of faith gathers for worship and prayer.
- The second part is Recollected Prayer. These are the spontaneous prayers that can be part of any day or time: prayers of adoration or praise, prayers of confession, prayers of thanks, prayers for the needs of ourselves and others.
- The third and most neglected part, is the Psalms. This involves reading the Psalms in a prayerful manner on a daily or near-daily basis. If the Psalms are not now part of your prayer life I urge you to make them a part of your prayer life. I think you will find they will help overcome the obstacles that would keep your heart from seeking the Lord.