

Nine Psalms: An Introduction

Introduction:

So first, let me set the bar as low as possible here. Then we'll all be happy together when today's message isn't terrible!

I want to set the bar low because today is an introduction message, and introduction messages can be, oh, information-heavy. I hope that I can point out things that are helpful to keep in mind as we walk through some psalms together, and keep our attention, too. We'll see!

Beyond this, we know the Psalms. We've studied them, we've read and sung them. We have whole bits of the Psalms memorized and don't even realize it until a word or two triggers some cascade of them.

So some of what I'll say will be for some of us a review; some of it will be for some of us a reminder. I hope for all of us, we find it a little bit compelling, and it makes us want to spend more time with these gifts God has given to us.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

What They Are:

We tend to think of the Book of Psalms as one thing, you know? There's a lot of them, and they are sort of the same thing, more or less. There's some stuff that we like and maybe read a lot, stuff we don't, and we always avoid it, and there you go. This last bit might be true, but the rest isn't.

There are 150 Psalms in our Bibles. Some of them could fit on a business card at size 12 font; one of them in particular, Psalm 119, whose sections are built off of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet--a type of poem called an "acrostic"--takes up multiple pages in even the tiniest little Bible-font size. The Book of Psalms--often called the "Psalter"--is actually divided into five different books. Each closes with a praise to God (Kraus 1993, 16).

I: 1-41

II: 42-72

III: 73-89

IV: 90-106

V: 107-150

And these 150 Psalms, they are poems. Each of them is poetry, and to interpret them is to interpret poetry. But they aren't the sort of poetry that we might be familiar with or that we teach our kids. They almost never rhyme, you know? Because Israelite poetry, Hebrew poetry, didn't rhyme. It depended on repetition in lines, on wordplay, on comparisons and

contrasts, and on the way words and phrases are structured--something we almost never, ever get, because when you translate poetry that depends on structure into another language--you lose the structure.

English is Subject-Verb-Object, right? He Preached The Sermon. You can put an adjective in there if you want: He Preached the Iffy Sermon. But Hebrew doesn't depend on word order to communicate, not entirely, and especially not when you're talking about poetry, which isn't regular speech. This is why if we're trying to really interpret a Psalm, it's best to get two or three or a dozen english translations around you. Or learn biblical Hebrew, you know? We all have a choice!

How We Use Them:

But we almost never, ever say to ourselves, "I think I'll spend some time interpreting a Psalm today." Some people do, and they sell literally tens of commentaries to the rest of Christianity.

Because like nearly all poetry, the Psalms are deeply, deeply personal poems; to read them in impersonal ways--as insights into Israel's self-understanding, as commentary on some event in King David's life, or as only prophecies about Jesus--is to miss their first point. It would be like me interrupting Bo, as she cries, to tell her about the physiological purpose or evolutionary advantage of tears. It's not wrong, but I'm not going to

win a parenting award for it.

Categories:

But of course, the Psalms aren't all the same. People categorize them in various ways; a common way is to divvy them up between "hymns of praise," as one scholar puts it, and "songs of complaint and lament." (The Psalms & The Life of Faith, Walter Brueggemann, 268ff.) Praise on the one side, Lament on the other. Lament, of course, is a fancy word for whatever form our sadness and sorrow and grief take when we give voice to it.

These Lament Psalms give voice to "remorse and guilt," to "grief and abandonment," both individual and collective. They give voice to a desire for "raw, unrestrained vengeance" as someone puts it (Ibid.). This desire for vengeance, for pay-back, is an alien thing to us for all sorts of reasons--but largely as a function of how good we generally have it. We'll be talking more about this in a couple of weeks. But most of the Lament psalms basically say "Things aren't right. They could be better. I reject this. God you've got to do something" (Ibid., 105).

A special group of seven Psalms in these "Psalms of Lament" are called the "Penitential Psalms," because they express penitence, an uncommon word for repentance. **(6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143.)**

The “hymns of praise” are just that: songs, poems, about how good God is. They recognize God as the creator of everything and as the nurturer and sustainer of Israel, God’s People. They’re born out of this fundamental truth, and the goodness the particular psalmist--a psalm writer--is experiencing at the moment. These psalms recite what God has done for God’s People or for the particular author. Some of them are about Israel’s king, some about Mt. Zion and Jerusalem, some about personal rescue, some definitely written for use during special festivals, the same way we only sing Christmas Carols at Christmastime (Cf. Kraus 1993, 38ff.). Most Psalms end with a call--whether to everyone around, or just to the author’s own heart--to trust in God because whatever the circumstances, God is trustworthy. These “hymns of praise,” don’t just end that way, they’re full of that same stuff.

Authors & King David:

And the authors of these psalms vary, but almost half are attributed to Israel’s great king David. I remember a paper I had to write in a Hebrew Bible class in undergrad that highlighted the way a particular Psalm--I don’t even remember which, maybe 51--lined up with a series of events in David’s life. My poor undergraduate teacher.

None of us would be surprised that the authorship of the Psalms are highly debated. There’s one attributed

to Moses, a couple to Solomon, to other Old Testament people like Ethan, Heman, Jeduthun; many to Asaph, and the Korahites. If we were to open up Chronicles, where most of these people are named, we'd see their connection to David, and there are Psalms that are specifically connected to events in David's life as well (McCann Jr., 1996, 655). In fact, 1 Chronicles 16 relates how David put Asaph in charge of basically making Psalms and singing them daily (ibid., 655).

How They Work Us: Language & Culture:

And because these Psalms give voice to the total range of human emotion--grief, contentment, rage, relief, bitterness, pleasure, forlornness, hope, loneliness, joy--entirely because these Psalms, taken together, give voice to the huge range of human emotion, they've functioned in a really consistent way in the life of God's People, and the Church since its birth.

They've functioned as common, shared words that the whole Church can use to give voice to their emotions. Does this make sense? They've been a common language for God's People, words that we can say together, during seasons of grief, fear, desperation, or together during seasons of hope, peace, and plenty. Any culture is shaped by shared language; and the Psalms are language that the Church has shared together for our lament and our praise. They're a cultural key, holding the God's People together. So

there's this corporate, connecting function. Many, many of the Psalms were meant to be read by Israel, together, during worship, and they include information about how to sing them, what instruments to play alongside them. These things don't translate well, but they remind us of this gathering, communal thing.

This is why the Book of Psalms gets called the "Songbook of the Church" and the "Prayerbook of the Church." Because we sing them together, we pray them together, and when we're alone, we have traditionally--this may not be true of all of us, but probably is of some of us--leaned into these psalms for language that we can't quite find the voice for, singing them, praying them, memorizing them so that when we find ourselves in that place of fear or hope again, this or that Psalm just comes out.

This is also the reason why whenever the Church arrives among some new language group, one of the first things translated is the Psalms. A common, accessible language for our grief and for our praise is really, really important in shaping and nurturing life-long discipleship.

How They Work Us: Formational

I don't know how many of us have noticed the 80s the past few years. Music, color-schemes, pop-culture, there's there's a huge 80s thing going on. And this happens; popular culture recycles itself, that's no

surprise to us; it does it for sentimental, capitalistic reasons. But I think if we wanted to do something really, really good for Godly, stewardship reasons, it would be to go back to the very traditional practice of singing Psalms together, reading psalms on our own, putting Psalms to music. We should take up what was common to the Church.

Because singing, praying, memorizing, the Psalms has been a central part of the Church's culture. When Jeff, some years ago, began to incorporate psalms regularly, weekly, into our time together I thought it was great. But I had followed Jesus for a decade by then, and hadn't really spent all that much time in the Psalms.

The truth is that our worship--the songs we sing and prayers we pray--has a critical role in shaping our beliefs about God, the world and ourselves. Worship is an engine for discipleship; it is constantly, constantly shaping us, teaching us, remaking us.

So this Songbook or Prayerbook of the Church, it's been used to create in the Church a culture that's very specific sort of culture: one that is constantly being reminded of what God has done and what God has promised to do. As it helps give us, the Church, words to express what we're feeling and experiencing, we live more authentically and honest before God and with each other.

And this cycles back around; living authentically and honestly with God and each other while also being reminded about God positions us to discover God in the midst of our lives more quickly, so that we can praise and lament God together more fully. This is what worship does, you know? It makes God the center around which our lives turn. And the Psalms provide a ready-made language for our worship, one the Church has relied upon since it first began.

How They Work Us: Challenge Us

But: we don't always connect with the Psalms. There's not often an alignment between how we feel right now and the Psalm that we're reading right now.

And if we're attentive to what we're reading or hearing, notice what we're singing, any given Psalm can be really annoying, you know? It can chafe against our hearts or experiences. Why this thing about God's goodness when I don't believe it right now? Why this thing about vengeance when I'm so content? Why this thing about certainty when I feel so confused, or repentance when I don't want to repent? The Psalms, by giving expression to the full range of what it means to be a person in relationship with God forces us, now and then, to deal with emotions and situations that we'd rather avoid. This is another reason why the Church has so often read them together; when we read them alone, out of duty or interest, we're far more likely to skip through the ones

that don't connect with us in that moment and find ones that do. But to do that is to miss out on the opportunity for growth that comes when we have to deal with something we don't like.

And we people are very good at avoiding things we want to avoid, especially when it's the stuff of our own hearts.

So the Psalms work in the life of God's People by helping create a shared culture, a shared language of our experience of God. They give us words that we need to express what we're feeling and experiencing. They form and shape us, reminding us who God is, who we are, what it means to be alive and live well. And they challenge us to deal with emotions and experiences we'd rather not deal with.

How Often?

How often do we read the Psalms? At the end of the day, because they are such human prayers of lament and praise, these things are some of the most accessible writing in the Bible. But we don't spend much time with them. It could be because we just forget, you know? But I wonder if it's because they really do push us to experience emotions that we'd rather not feel. St. Augustine, who is handy to quote because he wrote about everything and changed his mind a lot, suggests that "if the psalm prays, pray. If it laments, lament. If it rejoices, rejoice. If it hopes, hope.

If it fears, fear. For everything which is written here is a reflection of us”

(<http://oblatesosbbelmont.org/2011/06/09/psalms/>). I think, for most of us, the idea of reading the Psalms and inviting our hearts to experience what the psalmist is experiencing sounds at best, like work, and at worst, scary and alien.

But it's good to keep in mind that there are whole, huge parts of Christianity that read through Psalms regularly together just as Israel did and practicing Jews still do. If we were Anglican or Episcopalian, reading their devotional, "*The Book of Common Prayer*," and doing what is called, "The Daily Office," the daily readings that are offered in the *Book of Common Prayer*, then we'd be reading through all 150 Psalms every month or two, depending on the pace we'd choose--but we'd be doing it alongside thousands and thousands of other Anglicans or Episcopalians

(<http://www.richardliantonio.com/blog/2009/08/how-to-pray-the-daily-office-from-the-book-of-common-prayer-part-4-the-psalms/>). A regular way of life for those monks who follow St. Benedict--Benedictine Monks--is to read the Psalms weekly. Some of us, who follow Bible reading plans of one sort or another may read through the Psalms with some regularity, and if you haven't been paying attention, I think that can be really, really good--but the simple truth is that we'll miss out on that sense of reading and considering the Psalms alongside others, unless we do make for

ourselves some sort of community of people who read through the Psalms with us.

Part of my hope for this little series is that as we walk through a few Psalms together we'll experience all these things: culture formation, words that can express what we're experiencing, reminders of who God is and who we are as his people, a challenging, discordant, uncomfortableness to what we read that can invite us to deal with our own hearts.

I want us to think about these things as we come to an end, and consider these things as we move forward.

Psalm 16: Listening

I'm going to read Psalm 16 to us a couple of times. We've heard it once already this morning, in between shuffling in and out, whispering to each other, quieting our kids or checking our phones. But I'll read it again. Quietly. You can listen along, or read along in a Bible or on the back of the outline of today's message.

Psalm 16 is popular with the Church because the earliest Christians, after Jesus' death and resurrection, saw in it how the Psalmist anticipated Jesus' return to life. It's a psalm that gives voice to the truth that, as one author puts it, "suffering and glory are inseparable." "Suffering and glory are inseparable." (ibid., 738). It points us away from fearing death or scrabbling after what others seem to pursue, and

instead directs our hearts to God, particularly in times where death really may come upon us. These aren't small things. Let's listen.

**1 Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.**

**2 I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."**

**3 I say of the holy people who are in the land,
"They are the noble ones in whom is all my
delight."**

**4 Those who run after other gods will suffer
more and more.**

**I will not pour out libations of blood to such
gods**

or take up their names on my lips.

**5 Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.**

**6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in
pleasant places;**

surely I have a delightful inheritance.

**7 I will praise the Lord, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.**

8 I keep my eyes always on the Lord.

**With him at my right hand, I will not be
shaken.**

**9 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue
rejoices;**

my body also will rest secure,

10 because you will not abandon me to the

***realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful[b] one see decay.
11 You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.***

Conclusion:

The nine psalms we're going to look at over the next couple of months will move us in various ways. We'll be met where we're at, we'll be invited to let ourselves be challenged by what we read, sing or hear; we'll share these experiences together, and remember who God is, who we are as God's Church, and who each one of us is as God's child. I hope it will be worth our while, and we are moved a little more to say with David, "I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken."