

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

Early in Jesus' ministry, Luke's Gospel tells of a time that Jesus was "praying in a certain place." When he finished his time of prayer, one of Jesus' disciples asked for instruction on how to pray. (From this, we receive the Lord's Prayer. You can read about this in Luke 11:1-4.) Prayer, it would seem, is not something that comes naturally to us. If this is the case, where can we go to learn how to pray?

For centuries, that answer has been the Psalms. Persons who have been around the church for any length of time are familiar with a few of the Psalms. Who hasn't heard Psalm 23 ("the Lord is my Shepherd...") or Psalm 121 ("I lift up my eyes to the hills...") read at a funeral or other time when words of comfort are called for? Who hasn't heard the words of Psalm 51 ("Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow...") at an Ash Wednesday service, or as part of the invitation at a revival meeting?

But if we venture out from a few familiar Psalms into the unpredictable wildness of the rest of the Psalter, we find out that the persons who offered these words in both public and private prayer had the idea that they could talk about almost *anything* to God. What kind of suffering was the Psalmist experiencing when he or she prayed "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears" (Psalm 6:6)? How might we respond if someone stood up during the Joys and Concerns and said, in effect, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" (Psalm 22:1). And is there anything we might experience that justifies the terrible words of Psalm 137:8-9: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks"? For a people who have been taught to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44), these words seem almost unchristian. Yet there they are, right in the pages of our Bible. Are we brave enough to utter words like these if the situation warrants it?

Each one of us knows someone with whom we have to be careful with our words; we can't just say certain things to them. It may be that we don't know them well enough to say these things; a strong, negative (but truthful) opinion would damage the relationship. Or it could be that we know them all too well and understand they can't handle the truth of knowing how we feel about them or something they did.

But the Psalm writers prayed and spoke and sang as if they could say anything to God—even things that many of us would be uncomfortable with being spoken in worship.

Somehow, we have been taught that it is not proper to talk like this in worship; in the case of a few of the Psalms we've probably been taught that it's not proper to even think like this. But these old Hebrew pray-ers had a relationship with God that was deeply rooted and secure. They knew that God could handle the truth, and so they let their truest and most vulnerable emotions fly.

We are better off for this, because in the absence of prayers that come from a place of deep emotion and honesty, we are all too often left with generic prayers that neither offend nor deeply satisfy; they accomplish nothing remotely connected to what we're going through. In describing how pastors should learn to pray, Eugene Peterson shares advice that with just a bit of modification could easily apply to each of us:

"We can as well permit a physician to concoct their own medicines from herbs and weeds in the backyard as allow a pastor to learn prayer from his or her own subjectivities. Prayer must not be fabricated out of emotional fragments or professional duties. Uninstructed and untrained, our prayers are something learned by tourists out of a foreign language phrase book: we give thanks at meals, repent of the grosser sins, bless the Rotary picnic, and ask for occasional guidance. Did we think prayer was merely a specialized and incidental language to get by on during those moments when we happened to pass through a few miles of religious country? But our entire lives are involved. We need fluency in the language of the country we live in" (*Working the Angles*, 58).

Because the Psalm authors trust in a relationship with God that is deeply rooted, these prayers cover a whole range of human emotion. As you read through the Psalms, you'll notice that these prayers complain, rage, question, lament, wonder, confess, praise, and more. The Psalmists are quite pleased to proclaim to any and all who will hear that God is great. They are equally willing to admit that life is bad, even while affirming that God is good.

In a world where injustice and the marginalization of certain people exists right next to the beauty of God's creation; in times when our pursuit of the truth is hampered by news stories that have been fabricated out of thin air to appeal to our lesser selves; in a season where employment seems tenuous, pressures from work, school, and even hobbies demand more and more of us; in a year where the life expectancy of Americans actually dropped for the first time in recent history, this series of sermons and Bible Studies is designed to help us answer one question: "How are we to pray in light of the blessings and challenges of this time and place?"

How to use this Bible reading guide

This Bible reading guide is designed to help you read all 150 Psalms from June 4 through July 16. In general, that means reading three or four Psalms each day, though there are a few exceptions to that along the way. Perhaps you can choose one Psalm per day, or a few per week to dive into a bit more deeply.

Finally, a note to families. As I worked on this guide, I did it thinking that families could read at least some of the Psalms together. Most Psalms are short enough that one Psalm could be read aloud each night at dinner, or bedtime, or some other time appropriate for your family schedule. If you do not already have time set aside for family devotions, perhaps the Psalms could be a place to start.

Tim Harvey, Pastor, Roanoke Oak Grove COB

June 4: ... Psalms 1-4
June 5: Psalms 5-8
June 6: Psalms 9-12
June 7: Psalms 13-15
June 8: Psalms 16-18
June 9: Psalms 19-21
June 10: .. Psalms 22-24

June 11: .. Psalms 25-28
June 12: .. Psalms 29-32
June 13: .. Psalms 33-34
June 14: .. Psalms 35-37
June 15: .. Psalms 38-41
June 16: .. Psalms 42-45
June 17: .. Psalms 46-49

June 18: .. Psalms 50-52
June 19: .. Psalms 53-56
June 20: .. Psalms 57-59
June 21: .. Psalms 60-62
June 22: .. Psalms 63-66
June 23: .. Psalms 67-70
June 24: .. Psalms 71-74

June 26: .. Psalms 78-81
June 27: .. Psalms 82-84
June 28: .. Psalms 85-87
June 29: .. Psalms 88-90
June 30: .. Psalms 91-94
July 1: Psalms 95-98

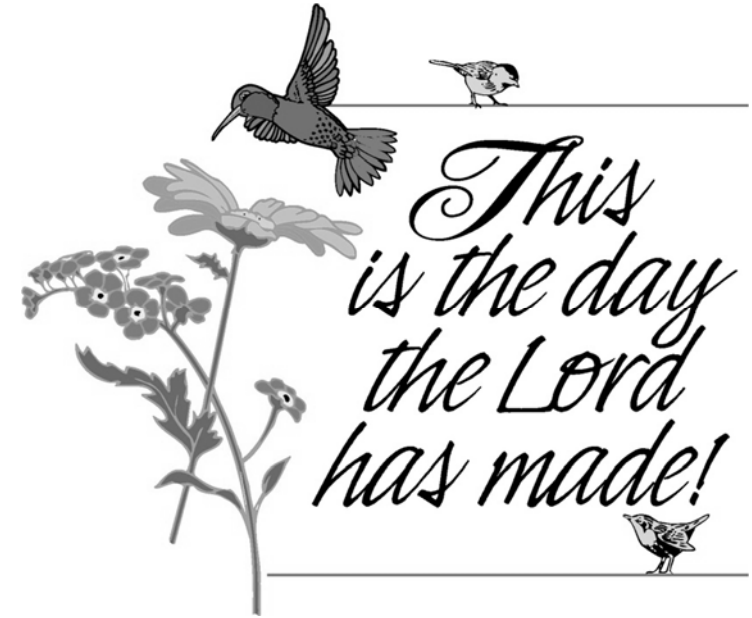
July 2: Psalms 99-102
July 3: Psalms 103-105
July 4: Psalms 106-108
July 5: Psalms 109-112
July 6: Psalms 113-115
July 7: Psalms 116-118
July 8: Psalm 119

July 9: Psalms 120-125
July 10: ... Psalms 126-130
July 11: ... Psalms 131-134
July 12: ... Psalms 135-136
July 13: ... Psalms 137-139
July 14: ... Psalms 140-143
July 15: ... Psalms 144-147

July 16: ... Psalms 148-150

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The Psalms



**Springs of Living Water
Spiritual Disciplines Folder
Summer – Part 1
June 4 to July 16, 2017
Church of the Brethren and Beyond**