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PSALMS

Prayers of the Heart



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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com

Getting the Most Out of *Psalms*

People look into mirrors to see how they look; they look into the Psalms to find out who they are. A mirror is an excellent way to learn about our appearance; the Psalms are the biblical way to discover ourselves. With a mirror we detect a new wrinkle here, an old wart there. We use a mirror when shaving or applying makeup to improve, if we can, the face we present to the world. With the psalms we bring into awareness an ancient sorrow, release a latent joy. We use the Psalms to present ourselves before God as honestly and thoroughly as we are able. A mirror shows us the shape of our nose and the curve of our chin, things we otherwise know only through the reports of others. The Psalms show us the shape of our souls and the curve of our sin, realities deep within us, hidden and obscured, for which we need focus and names.

Psalms: Poetry and Prayer

The Psalms are poetry and the Psalms are prayer. These two features need to be kept in mind always. If either is forgotten, the Psalms will not only be misunderstood but misused.

Poetry is language used with intensity. It is not, as so many suppose, decorative speech. Poets tell us what our eyes, blurred with too much gawking, and our ears, dulled with too much chatter, miss around and within us. Poets use words to drag us into the depths of reality itself, not by reporting on how life is but by pushing-pulling us into the middle of it. Poetry gets at the heart of existence. Far from being cosmetic language, it is intestinal. It is root language. Poetry doesn't so much tell us something we never knew as bring into recognition what was latent or forgotten or overlooked. The Psalms are almost entirely this kind of language. Knowing this, we will not be

looking primarily for ideas about God in the Psalms or for direction in moral conduct. We will expect, rather, to find exposed and sharpened what it means to be human beings before God.

Prayer is language used in relation to God. It gives utterance to what we sense or want or respond to before God. God speaks to us; our answers are our prayers. The answers are not always articulate. Silence, sighs, groaning—these also constitute responses. But God is always involved, whether in darkness or light, whether in faith or despair. This is hard to get used to. Our habit is to talk *about* God, not *to* him. We love discussing God. But the Psalms resist such discussions. They are provided not to teach us about God but to train us in responding to him. We don't learn the Psalms until we are praying them.

Those two features, the poetry and the prayer, account for both the excitement and the difficulty in studying the Psalms. The *poetry* requires that we deal with our actual humanity—these words dive beneath the surfaces of pose and pretense straight into the depths. We are more comfortable with prose, the laid-back language of our ordinary discourse. The *prayer* requires that we deal with God—this God who is determined on nothing less than the total renovation of our lives. We would rather have a religious bull session.

One editorial feature of the Psalms helps to keep these distinctive qualities before us. The Psalms are arranged into five books. At the end of Psalm 41, 72, 89, 106 and 150, formula sentences indicate a conclusion. Because of these mini-conclusions the Psalms are usually printed (in English translations) as Book I (Psalm 1—41), Book II (42—72), Book III (73—89), Book IV (90—106) and Book V (107—150).

This five-book arrangement matches the five-book beginning of the Bible, deeply embedded in our minds as the five books of Moses. The five books of Moses are matched by the five books of David like two five-fingered hands clasping one another in greeting. In the five books of Moses God addresses us by his word, calling us into being and shaping our salvation. In the five books of David we personally respond to this word that addresses us.

Answering God

Prayer is answering speech. God's Word has not done its complete work until it evokes an answer from us. All our answers are prayers. The Psalms train us in this answering speech, this language that responds to all God's creating and saving words targeted to our lives.

Our usual approach to God's Word is to ask, What is God saying to me? That is almost always the correct question when reading Scripture. But in the Psalms the question is, How do I answer the God who speaks to me?

In the Psalms we do not primarily learn what God *says* to us but how to honestly, devoutly and faithfully *answer* his words to us. In the course of acquiring language we learn how to answer our parents, our teachers, our employers and our friends, but we do not get very much practice in answering God. The Psalms train us in answering God. And so we bring a somewhat different mindset to the Psalms than we do to the rest of Scripture—we are learning to *pray*, not study, although the two activities will always be interconnected.

We know almost nothing of the circumstances in which the 150 psalms were written. David is the most-named author, but most are anonymous. But that hardly matters, for the life-settings of the Psalms are not geographical or cultural but *interior*. Calvin called them “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”

Everything that anyone can feel or experience in relation to God is in these prayers. You will find them the best place in Scripture to explore all the parts of your life and then to say who you are and what is in you—guilt, anger, salvation, praise—to the God who loves, judges and saves you in Jesus Christ. These twelve studies are designed to guide you into twelve interior dimensions of your life and bring them to expression before God.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can delve into the author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. If you are studying a book, it will be helpful to read through the entire book prior to the first study. The questions are written using the language of the New International Version, so you may wish to use that version of the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version is also recommended.

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your

group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

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Praying Our Inattention

Psalm 1

Family responsibilities. Work deadlines. Education goals. Home maintenance. So much is clamoring for our attention each day. And that's not to mention the distractions that come from the media. Most of us can't step immediately from the noisy high-stimulus world into the quiet concentration of prayer.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What thoughts and concerns most often distract when you begin to pray?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Attempt to clear your mind before you begin to study. Sit in silence for a few moments. What thoughts and concerns come to mind? List them. Ask God to help you to focus on what he wants you to learn.

Psalm 1 is not prayer, exactly, but the preface to prayer. We do not begin to pray by praying but by coming to attention. Psalm 1 is the biblical preparation for a life of prayer. Step by step it detaches us from activities and words that distract us from God so that we can be attentive before him. Psalm 1 provides a kind of entryway into the place of prayer. *Read Psalm 1.*

1. What contrasts do you notice in the psalm?

2. The first word in the psalm is *blessed*. (Some translate it *happy*.) What kind of expectations should that bring to our life of prayer?

3. What significance do you see in the progression from *walk* to *stand* to *sit* (v. 1)?

4. “The law of the LORD” is contrasted with the words *counsel*, *way* and *seat*. What does this contrast bring out?

5. The psalmist describes the person who *delights* in God’s law (v. 2). What is your emotional response to Scripture—not what you *believe* about it but how you *feel* about it?

6. *Tree* is the central metaphor of the psalm (v. 3). Put your imagination to use. How are law-delighting people like trees?

7. In what ways are the wicked like chaff (vv. 4-6)?

8. How do these two radically different portraits (the tree-righteous and the chaff-wicked) motivate you to delight in God's Word?

9. Do you feel a gap (or chasm!) between "real life" (work, school, family) and your prayer life? Explain.

10. How does meditation—listening to God speak to us through Scripture—prepare us for prayer?

11. How can you incorporate meditation on God's Word into your life?

12. Some prayer is spontaneous—a word of thanks, a cry of pain. Other prayer is routine—at meals, in public worship. But a *life* of prayer requires preparation, a procedure for moving from inattention to attention. The same *method* will not suit everyone. How can you develop an approach to meditation that fits your circumstances and development?

Ask God to help you keep your commitments to meditate and to pray.

Now or Later

Psalm 119 is an excellent passage to use in meditation. Use short chunks of it to reflect on as you prepare to pray this week.