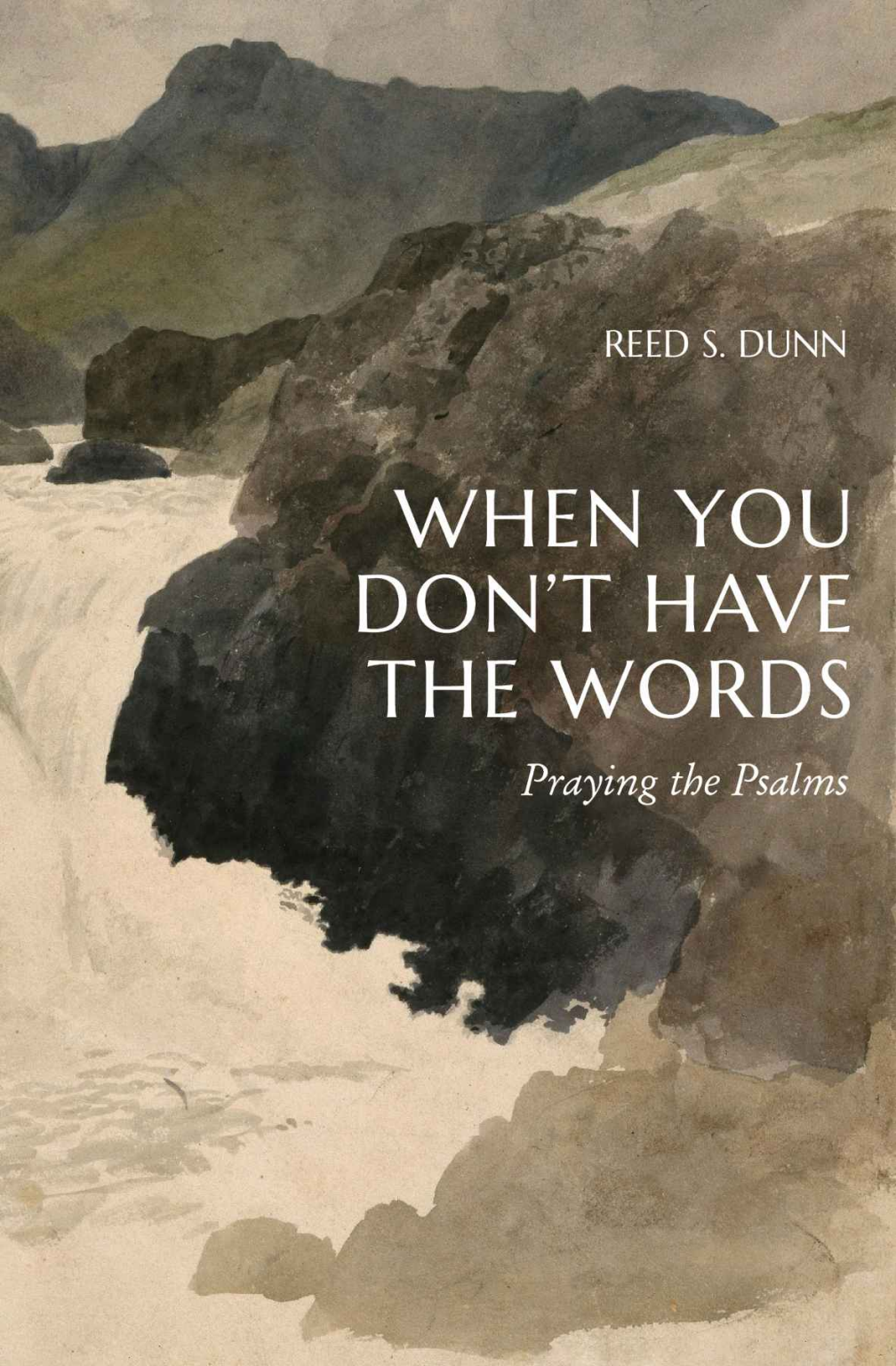

REED S. DUNN

WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE THE WORDS

Praying the Psalms

"I have prayed the Psalms for over thirty years, and I have yet to read a book that more closely resonates with my experience than this one. If you want to know how the Psalms will reshape your prayers, sufferings, hopes, and beliefs about God, then this is the book for you."

—CHAD BIRD, 1517

"I can still remember the time—the exact day and hour—when I could no longer find any words to pray. In a season of profound disorientation as a pastor, the bottom completely fell out of prayer life. I will never forget how the Psalms leapt to life and gave me an incredibly rich and profoundly healing vocabulary for prayer. It saved my life. I have read a lot of works on the power of the Psalms in prayer, but this may be the most warm, honest, practical, and Christ-centered guide I have read. As a fellow struggler and all-too-often delinquent in prayer, I found Reed's invitation to Psalmic prayer to be generous and kind; his desire to help me draw near to Christ to be earnest and authentic; and his advice to be practical and wise. He made me feel like stumbling forward into a richer life of prayer was wholly possible because it is all by grace alone. There are chapters and exercises that surprised me in how they led me directly into communion with Christ. After all, the Psalms were the prayer book that sustained Jesus all the way to the cross. This will be the first book I will recommend to anyone who has felt like a failure in prayer and longs to encounter Jesus in every page of Scripture."

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"This accessible book on praying the Psalms is packed with insight and wisdom and is bound to be of enormous help to readers intent on deepening their faith and their prayer life. I warmly commend it!"

—IAIN PROVAN, Regent College, Vancouver

"Reed Dunn provides a practical and theological guide for praying the entire Psalter. He addresses the challenges we face when praying the psalms of the righteous, imprecatory psalms, or pre-written prayers in general, and builds a strong argument for ways that this ancient practice leads Christians into deeper communion with God."

—RACHEL WELCHER, author of *Talking Back to Purity Culture*

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Reed S. Dunn

When You Don't Have the Words: Praying the Psalms

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For my wife Lee Ann and daughters,
Jennalee, Adeline, and Tarikwa

Contents

A Prayer

O Lord, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but you, O Lord, are the strength of my heart and
my portion forever.
For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
But for me it is good to be near you;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Part 1

A Psalmic Orientation

Chapter 1

The Ancient Path

Thus says the Lord: "Stand by the roads, and look, and
ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is;
and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."
Jeremiah 6:16

Throughout Scripture, we are encouraged to prioritize the presence of God. We are told to seek the Lord's presence continually and be constant in prayer (Psalm 105:4; Romans 12:12). The access we have to God is truly staggering. When we pray, our words mix and mingle with the chorus of creatures that surround the Lord's throne. Day and night those beings never cease to cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty!" (Revelation 4:8). And our prayers are included among theirs. Our words rise like incense into a realm we can scarcely imagine (Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 141:2; Revelation 8:3–4).

The presence of God is a place of mystery and awe. It may be a place of dread for some, but for Christians, it is the source of our greatest comfort, joy, and security. We can speak directly to him

whose very presence burned like fire in the wilderness. Yet we are welcomed in and nourished for being there. As Psalm 16:11 says, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

With such an encounter available to us, one would think Christians would rarely leave his presence, but it's more complicated than that. God's presence is marvelous, but it is also hidden. In the Old Testament, God shrouded himself in smoke or veiled himself within the temple. Because of Christ, those barriers have been removed, yet we find ourselves struggling all the same. Today, God veils himself in the ordinariness of life. When we meet God, we don't get to hear Sinai's trumpet blast or stand at the edge of the glassy sea. We simply pray; we take the sacraments; and we study God's word. God is no less present in these things, but they can feel surprisingly mundane.

Most of us would like a little more feedback, more assurance that what we see isn't all that there is. Twice in the book of Daniel, angels show up to assure him that his prayers were not only being heard, but they were being answered. First, Gabriel told Daniel that his prayers had been received and he was greatly loved (Daniel 9:23). Later, a second angel told him that a great spiritual struggle had delayed the response to his prayers (Daniel 10:12–13).

How nice if we had such assurance: to know that we were praying as we should, praying in the right direction even, and that God was responding. If angels appeared when I prayed, I'm sure I would pray more often than I do. But we rarely get that assurance.

Spirituality, for many of us, can feel like guesswork. We try what has worked for our friends and hope that it works for us. We might never even question whether our spirituality is the kind of spirituality that God wants for us.

We should have more clarity on something so important. If God wants us to seek him continually, surely he has offered us a way, some kind of template to guide our spiritual experience. We shouldn't have to figure it out for ourselves but, too often, that is what we do. We make our own path to God out of modern values and personal taste. We busy ourselves with missions because we like to measure our achievements. We bury ourselves in study because we prefer certainty over mystery. We exaggerate our joy in order to avoid the silence of God. None of these are necessarily bad, but something more certain is available.

God has provided a guide, an ancient path, that can lead us into his presence. This guide pierces through the veil of mystery with something that we can actually hold in our hands. It brings together the ordinary act of praying with divine words that come straight from God himself. It is true that God has hidden his presence, but he has also made himself available. We are not left to our imagination, and we are not expected to find our own way. We do not need to hack through some jungle or find our bearings in a trackless waste. Instead, we can simply follow our Lord wherever his ancient path leads.

God's ancient path is the path of psalmic prayer. It is a form of prayer that keeps us from wondering what we should say to God

and how we should say it. Praying the Psalms takes much of the guesswork out of spirituality and tamps down our spiritual whims. Believers have been using psalmic prayer to meet God since the time of David and it works as well for us as it did for them. The Psalms are the original prayer book of God's people. In this book, we will explore what it means to pray them.

The Psalms as a Book of Prayer

When we read God's word, we observe those events that have already taken place. We even have to study things that would be obvious to the original audience because we are so far removed from what transpired. For instance, each plague in Egypt would have had particular significance to the people in that region, and the common Egyptian would have noticed it immediately. But we can only figure that out through study. We read Isaiah's prophecies and, to understand them well, we need to do significant background work on the politics of the ancient Near East. Even in the New Testament, we observe stories about Jesus and read letters written to ancient churches that are quite different from our own church experiences.

Scripture tells the stories of people who lived long ago, in far flung places. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through the word, so we are at no disadvantage, but we might feel like bystanders to an ancient conversation. When we do a Bible study, we snoop around those stories like detectives, trying to piece together significant details and highlight bits of information that will become

important as the story unfolds. We need to study Scripture because we weren't there when it happened.

The Psalms, however, are different. They invite us into the middle of the story. They bring us into direct conversation with God. Simply reading a psalm turns us into the primary speaker and God into our audience. When Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path," it is encouraging us to pray, not observe. We don't have to do a word search about feet or a background study about how ancient lamps were used. Instead, the psalm simply prompts us to tell God that his word is a lamp to our feet. It's that simple. We speak rather than observe. The words of that psalm become our words to God.

Athanasius argued this very point in the fourth century. He taught the church that the Psalms were given to us in a way that no other Scripture is:

> He who recites the psalms is uttering [them] as his own words,... as if they were written concerning him, and he accepts them and recites them not as if another were speaking, nor as if speaking about someone else. But he handles them as if he were speaking about himself. And the things spoken are such that he lifts them up to God as himself acting and speaking them from himself.[1]

Somewhere along the way, however, modern Christians started using the Psalms differently. We quit praying them and started seeing them as a record of someone else's experience. We study

Psalm 19 to learn about God's law. We read Psalm 63 to watch David in the cave. We read Psalm 137 and chuckle at Israel's wrath. Our penchant for examining Scripture may have become an obstacle to our using the Psalms. We inspect the Psalms as if they were happening inside a snow globe. We underline the inspiring bits, but mostly keep our distance from the experiences that they describe. And this robs us of the true purpose of the Psalter. The Psalms were meant to be *our* prayers and not just the words of ancient people.

The challenge, however, is greater than that. Modern Christians may be hesitant to pray the Psalms because we value our own words and experience over that of ancient people. We believe that prayers written by others cannot possibly be as heartfelt as our own. We assume that scripted prayers are rote, which we associate with thoughtless and inauthentic religion. We are living in one of the only times where believers have abandoned the practice of praying the Psalms, and I think that is because we prioritize the individual and the new over the community and the old.

Yet things are changing. Christians are beginning to embrace the past again. Some of us crave a weightier version of Christianity and long to feel connected to those who came before us. We want the creeds, the sacraments, and the liturgy. We want fathers and mothers in the faith. If you are reading this book on ancient prayer, then you probably already feel this in your bones. You are already aware that there is more to spiritual practice than the abridged spirituality that's offered by the contemporary church. As the modern church prioritized the self, it minimized the rest of Christian history. It

rejected what seemed antiquated, only to discover that it was a source of depth and significance.

As I teach people to pray the Psalms, I love watching them realize that this is what prayer used to be like. They sometimes feel embarrassed, as if we were the first generation to forget how to use the wheel. And, in some sense, that's the case. We have made prayer much harder than it should be. We have put so much emphasis on praying in our own words that we have left people ill-equipped to find and experience the presence of God. And our fear of scripted prayers is unfounded. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he didn't tell them to pray in their own words. Rather, he gave them a scripted prayer. He taught them a prayer that, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noticed, seems to summarize the prayers in the Psalter.[2]

The Psalms are ancient prayers, used by ancient people, to meet the Ancient of Days. As we pray the Psalms, we have the chance to participate in that ancient conversation. We can speak words to God that he has been listening to for thousands of years. He crafted these prayers and, when we use them, our spiritual experience is shaped by his hand. The Psalms become the scaffolding for our Christian life, a scaffolding that God himself designed.

The Psalter and Its People

The book of Psalms has one hundred and fifty chapters, and each chapter is an individual prayer.[3] These prayers span the long life of Israel and range from every kind of spiritual experience. Psalm 90 is probably the oldest psalm, as it is attributed to Moses. Psalm 137, on

the other hand, was written while Israel was in Babylon, a mere five hundred years before Christ. Almost half of the psalms were written by David, but others were composed by the leaders in temple worship (for example, Asaph and the Sons of Korah). Many of the famous prayers in the Old Testament are republished and repeated in various psalms. The Psalms also contain prayers from events that were recorded in Scripture (Psalm 51) and others that were not (Psalm 7).

These one hundred and fifty prayers were collected together by ancient editors. They selected the order, grouped them together, and occasionally included historical and musical notes in the way of introduction. We know almost nothing about these editors, but we assume that they were working under the direction of the Holy Spirit. One thing seems certain, these ancient editors wanted to provide the community of faith with a single place to go in order to find prayers to God. At the end of the second scroll of Psalms, one of the editors wrote, "This concludes the *prayers* of David, son of Jesse" (Psalm 72:20, emphasis added).[4] Those editors saw themselves as constructing a prayer book.

As a prayer book, the Psalter was a spiritual companion for the people of God. Psalms were recited during times of personal tragedy and national events. They accompanied offerings and gave voice in worship; they were recited during pilgrimages, festivals, and sabbaths. There were psalms that were used during coronations and even one for commemorating a king's wedding. Because

they marked the highest and lowest moments, the Psalms offered a prayerful cadence to every aspect of life.

To us, however, the Psalms look more like poetry than prayer, and that can be misleading. You may have noticed this if you turned to the Psalms hoping to find some poetic ideal but instead found them talking about *Og, king of Bashan* (Psalm 135:11, 136:20). Many of the psalms seem completely uninterested in whether we are being inspired. Also, because the word *psalm* actually means *song*, it is tempting to think of the Psalter as a hymnal full of songs we will never sing. Poetry, however, had a different purpose for ancient people. They likely chanted the psalms instead of singing them, and the poetic structure made it easier to meditate on the words. Read a psalm out loud and you may notice the repetition. Phrases get repeated and often intensified, which gives the reader a chance to ponder a single idea in different ways.[5] Had the Psalter been nothing more than a hymnal, then the early church would have had no need to create their own "hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19).

These prayers were absolutely integral to the life of the ancient believer. In an age where we can curl up with the whole Bible, it's easy to forget that Scripture was largely unavailable to common people in the ancient world. Scripture was read in the synagogues and churches where it was kept. If a believer possessed any portion of the Bible, it was most likely a Psalter. For this reason, the Psalter acts as an abridged Bible that recounts history, teaches

theology, and casts the hope and vision of the people. For those who didn't have a Psalter, the Psalms were recited so often that most scholars believe ordinary Jews would have had large portions of it memorized.

I find it marvelous that God wanted the Psalter to be the central text of religious life. God could have compiled a collection of laws, drawn from Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but he chose to compile a book of prayers instead. That says something about who he is and what he wants from his people. He had so much he wanted to teach them, but he decided to teach them through recited prayer. He wanted prayer to be woven into their culture, to the point that psalms seemed to just roll off their tongue.

The triumphal entry of Jesus is a great example of this. During the Passover festival, the Jewish people prayed a collection of psalms called the Egyptian Hillel (Psalm 113–118). The words of those psalms would have been the backbone to that experience, ringing in the homes and synagogues as believers worshiped and gathered with old friends. On one such Passover, Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The people greeted him with the words they'd already been recited countless times, the words of the Egyptian Hillel: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Psalm 118:26 quoted in Matthew 21:9, Mark 11:9, and Luke 19:38)

The religious pilgrims probably chanted the whole psalm as Jesus entered the city, or at least large sections of it. In doing so, they proclaimed that the rejected stone was about to become the Cornerstone (118:22). They also cheered the fact that the Sacrifice

was on its way to the altar (118:27). Unbeknownst to them, the crowd laid out the whole plan of the passion week. At that moment, however, only Jesus knew the significance of the words that the pilgrims were shouting in the streets.

Jesus embodied the hopes, theology, and practice that believers had learned through centuries of praying the Psalms. It's no wonder, then, that the first Christians expressed their new religion along the same psalmic lines. The Psalms figure prominently in the early church. The disciples used Psalms 69 and 109 as the basis for replacing Judas with Matthias (Acts 1:20). Peter, in the first Christian sermon, relied on Psalms 16 and 110 to prove the identity of the risen Lord. The first description of Christian worship includes a reference to believers reciting "*the* prayers," which was likely a mixture of the Jewish Shema and the Psalms (Acts 2:42, emphasis added). It's not surprising, then, that the first prayer recorded in the book of Acts began with a recitation of Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25–26).

With the coming of Jesus, everything changed. Food laws and circumcision were terminated and soon the temple followed suit. Jewish social order was transformed, as there was no longer a distinction between Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, or female (Galatians 3:28). It was a time of complete spiritual upheaval, yet psalmic spirituality stayed the same. The Psalms were as important in the church as they had been in the synagogue. The Psalter is quoted more than any other book by the New Testament authors, and the Psalms gave shape to everything from the crucifixion narrative to the book of Hebrews. Paul exhorted Christians to share psalms with each other,

letting the word dwell in their hearts through the recitation of the Psalms (Ephesians 5:18–19; Colossians 3:16).

In the years after the apostles, the church began to further separate itself from Jewish identity. Christians created their own distinctives by replacing long-held Jewish practice. For example, in the first century, the Didache encouraged believers to pray the Lord's Prayer instead of the Jewish Shema and suggested new days to fast in order to differentiate themselves from Jews.[6] In the second century, Ignatius taught that Christians should no longer keep the Sabbath but "live in accordance with the Lord's Day."[7] Yet, as the Christian church built its identity and distinguished itself from Judaism, it didn't replace its practice of praying the Psalms.

The Psalter and Christian Spirituality

The spiritual practice that we explore in this book came into its own during the fourth century of the church. Believers may have used the Psalter the same way before this period, but we just don't know. Church history has largely focused its attention on leaders and heresies and rarely highlighted the practical spirituality of normal people. In the fourth century, however, things started to change. As Christianity became legal, believers could worry less about day-to-day survival. A new kind of Christian inquiry arose, one that popularized the soul's quest for God. And, as Christian spirituality became prominent, it's not surprising to see the Psalms at the center.

The Roman Empire legalized Christianity in AD 313 and, by 380, it was the state religion. This marked a sea change in Christian spirituality. Gone were the heroes who stood against civil magistrates. Gone was the persecution that purged the church of nominal believers. Christians even started to enjoy cultural and economic advantages over others as the Roman Empire experienced an ancient version of the "Bible Belt."

Reacting against a faith they saw as bloated, a small group of men and women in Alexandria, Egypt ventured into the Egyptian desert to prove their Christian mettle and meet their God. They considered themselves to be Christian athletes, enduring hardships that could no longer be found in the casual faith of the city. These people would become the first Christian monks. Whether we realize it or not, our modern experience of faith is deeply indebted to this community. They shined a spotlight on the inner life of the soul and inspired the world with their personal spirituality. It was then, for the first time, that Christians spoke and wrote openly about their personal connection with God.

These desert fathers headed into the wilderness with few worldly provisions and even less earthly direction. They sold their property and left their families. They essentially went into the desert blind, following rumors of hermits that had gone before them. They had little sense of the wilderness that stretched out before them, but the only path they cared to find was the path that led to God. This was a path they found mapped out in the Psalms. The Psalter formed

the backbone of their spirituality. They prayed through the Psalter obsessively. There are stories of monks praying through the whole Psalter every day. They were extreme enthusiasts, to say the least, but their fanciful visions and outrageous experiences did not interrupt their ongoing commitment to praying the Psalms.

One of those spiritual adventurers was John Cassian. Like many educated young men with means, Cassian left it all to explore the deserts of Palestine and Egypt, living among the monks and learning their ways. He stayed in the desert for much of his life. Then, after years in the wilderness, he moved to southern France with the desert practices in tow. Cassian founded a monastery in AD 415, near the town of Marseilles and thus, western monasticism was born. In both the monastery and the church, psalmic prayer spread throughout Europe and became a mainstay for all those who prioritized spirituality. In 516, St. Benedict incorporated the practice of psalmic prayer into his *Rule*, and monks and nuns have been praying through the whole Psalter every week from then until now.

Prayers for Today

For most of its existence, the church has made use of the Psalter as a means of prayer. The list of famous Christians who encouraged the church to pray the Psalms is too long to recount in full. From Athanasius to Bonhoeffer, from Orthodox priests to Catholic nuns, and from John Calvin to Martin Luther; all of them used the Psalms as their own prayers to God. The first Christians prayed the Psalms as they huddled in the upper room and bishops in the

Church of England republished the Psalter when they created the *Book of Common Prayer*. From famous theologians to ordinary believers, Christians for two millennia have found psalmic prayer to be a primary path to God. Yet believers today hardly know that we can use the Psalter this way.

I hope that this book can help you rediscover this ancient practice. When I first started praying the Psalms, it was so easy that it felt like cheating. I couldn't believe that I could open up the Bible and have words there for me to use. Like most modern Christians, I had convinced myself that praying in my own words was the best way to pray, but I really had no good words to say to God. Praying the Psalms was, for me, like flipping on a switch. I suddenly knew how and what to say to God. I had spent years wishing I could pray instead of actually praying. I was weighed down by the guilt of it. The truth is that my prayer life needed help. It is that help that I want to share with you.

This book is divided into two parts. Part one is an orientation towards psalmic prayer. In the next chapter I will make my case that the Psalter is a key ingredient in our spiritual formation. Chapter 3 will consider some practical tips for praying the Psalms. Part 2 will focus on the experience of praying the Psalms. The goal there is to introduce aspects of the Psalter that are easily missed or hard to pray. It is not an exhaustive study. You may notice there is no chapter on confessing sin, because that is a straightforward topic both in psalmody and in life. At the end of each chapter there is a reflection. The point of these will be to practice what we've been

learning. They will also give us a chance to consider some important topics that don't quite fit within the regular chapter.

The goal throughout this book is to make psalmic prayer, and spiritual practice in general, more accessible. Everyone has the right disposition to know and experience God, and interacting with him is easier than you might think. Eventually, praying them will become second nature, and I am confident that you will be blessed as you pray these ancient prayers. With practice, you will learn how to put your own hopes and fears into the words written by others. When that happens, you will begin praying prayers that God himself gave the church to pray. They are words composed in the presence of God, uniquely fitted for the presence of God.

This book is the fruit of my own spiritual journey. I don't pretend to be a Psalms scholar, but I do profess to be an avid Psalms pray-er. What I lack in credentials, church history has provided with countless fellow devotees. Martin Luther, for one, taught the church that the Psalter was a manual for prayer. He wrote,

> In my opinion, any man who will but make a trial in earnest of the Psalter and the Lord's Prayer will very soon bid the other pious prayers adieu, and say, Ah, they have not the sap, the strength, the heart, the fire, that I find in the Psalter; they are too cold, too hard, for my taste![8]

This has certainly been my experience. There simply aren't better ways to pray. There are reasons to pray in our own words, and history provides ample evidence of that practice, but God has made an

ancient path that leads to his presence. He is inviting us to follow. So, as Jeremiah has encouraged us, let us stand by the road and ask about the ancient path. Let us walk that path together and find rest for our souls (Jeremiah 6:16).

Reflection 1: The Psalter King

Praying Psalms 20–24

This first reflection gives us the chance to consider the most important person to ever pray the Psalms. Jesus's life and ministry was saturated with the Psalter. He quoted the Psalms more than any other book during his ministry, and the writer of Hebrews pictured Jesus as a member of the holy congregation, singing psalms amidst his brothers and sisters (Hebrews 2:12).

Jesus became like us when he became a human being. He felt hunger and thirst, joy and pain. His life on earth was also marked by the spiritual experiences indicative of normal Christian life. Like us, Jesus lived by faith and talked to the Father through prayer. Just as it does for us, the Psalter articulated the trials and tribulations of his life in a fallen world. While the four gospels describe the facts of God's incarnation and Paul's letters detail its implications, the Psalms provide us with a window into Jesus's incarnation experience. Through those prayers, Christ's humanity unfolds. As he prayed the Psalms, he joined in our human experience. As we pray those same Psalms, we can reflect on his life among us.

The connections between Jesus's life and the Psalter are limitless. One connection, however, always seems to make an impression

on me as I pray through the Psalter. It relates to his experience on the cross. One of his most famous sayings from the cross was, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, Psalm 22:1) Of all the things he said, this is the most heartbreaking, the most agonizing. It never fails to startle us.

Before I started praying the Psalms, I never thought of anyone, particularly Jesus, praying them. I assumed Jesus used that phrase from Psalm 22 like a quote instead of a scripted prayer. Of course, it voiced his anguish to the Father, which is technically prayer, but I never thought of Jesus actually praying through the Psalter in his quiet moments on the cross. Yet that is exactly what one scholar suggests.[9] Gordon Wenham noticed that Jesus quoted Psalm 22 at one point during the crucifixion and then, at a later point, Psalm 35. It led him to speculate that Jesus used the Psalter as a prayer book until his final breath.

In this first reflection, I would like to propose a spiritual exercise. I want to invite you to pray alongside Jesus with the words of the Psalms. In a later chapter, we will discuss how to pray the Psalms but for now, just read through them prayerfully. Become a prayerful observer of the emotional life of Christ. We've all heard sermons on the biology and physics of Roman crucifixion, with the goal of us understanding the physical price that Jesus paid. Through the Psalter, however, we can pray alongside him and wonder at his spiritual, rather than physical experience.

Let's begin with Psalm 20. It is a royal psalm and was probably used during the coronation of the king. It expresses the hope that things would go well for the one that God had anointed. Through Psalm 20, the people pray for God's blessing on the king. This was more than just wishing him well in his new job, because Israel's well-being depended on the king. God treated the people like he treated their king. The hope is that the king would be God's man. Psalm 20 requests that God keep the promises that he made to David (2 Samuel 7:14–15). It claims those promises in time and space.

> May [the LORD] send you [the king] help from the sanctuary
> and give you support from Zion!
> May he remember all your offerings
> and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!
>
> May he grant you your heart's desire
> and fulfill all your plans! (vv. 2–4)

Then comes Psalm 21. If Psalm 20 proclaimed the hope, then Psalm 21 declared the reality. In this psalm, Israel praises God for keeping those promises. Psalm 21:2 rejoices, saying,

> You have given [the king] his heart's desire
> and have not withheld the request of his lips.

These were the prayers that Jesus might have prayed on the cross. He was the true king of Israel. If ever there was a king that God would help from his sanctuary, it would be Jesus. If ever there was a king that could have the desire of his heart, it was him. Yet the hope and the joy of these psalms fell flat. Jesus hung on a cross instead of riding out into battle. He was laughed at by others instead of being the most blessed forever. Far worse, the father-son relationship was being ripped apart, as the Father turned his back on his Son. The promise to David was that God would always be there and always stay faithful, no matter what. Psalms 20–21 were built on that promise, a promise that was in the process of being broken.

God the Father and God the Son had watched horrible kings do abominable things throughout Israel's history. Kings committed adultery, sought counsel from witches, sacrificed their children, and led Israel into idolatry. Throughout all those years, God still treated those kings as sons. God kept sending prophets to warn them and kept honoring their efforts of obedience. However, on the cross, the true King and the true Son heard only silence.

Psalm 22 is tragic at any level, but is even more so when following the hope and the joy of Psalms 20–21. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" The heavens were shut to the one person for whom they should always be open. The first half of that psalm is a better description of the crucifixion than even the gospel writers provide. It was the ultimate defeat, the ultimate humiliation.

Then, however, Psalm 22 turns. The last third of the psalm dares to find hope in the midst of pain. I wonder if Jesus was able to

follow the psalm. Was he able to think of all the "yet unborn" that would know him because "he had done it?" (v. 31) After praying through Psalm 22, did he find comfort in Psalm 23? Did it bring him the same peace that it has brought countless Christians who face tragedy? And then there's Psalm 24.

Psalm 24 was one of the first texts the early church used to show the resurrection and ascension of Christ. The doors of heaven, which were shut to him in Psalm 22, are now flung open in Psalm 24 and the exalted Son can walk right in. If Jesus prayed this psalm, did it fill his heart with hope? Did the heavenly splendor seem close at hand? The King of Glory would be going home soon.

I picture Jesus continuing to pray. He certainly lived out the holiness that is expressed in Psalm 26. When I pray that psalm, it encourages me to remain faithful. Did it do the same for him? Meanwhile, Jesus had used the imagery of Psalm 27 to describe his crucifixion, I wonder if he re-lived those prophecies as he prayed those words (Psalm 27:6; John 8:28, 12:32). By Psalm 31, his work on the cross was complete. Jesus could now thank the Father because, "you take me out of the net they have hidden for me" (v. 4) His death would be the ultimate foil to the evil that surrounded him. Then Jesus prayed a line from that psalm with his final few breaths: "Into your hand I commit my spirit."

In this chapter we have considered how the psalmic path is the ancient path. It was prayed by countless believers before us, but none are more important than Jesus. The ancient path is his path, for he is the Way, the Truth, and Life. He is the Word made

flesh. In many ways, the Psalms are a kind of touchpoint between heaven and earth, where the interests of one meets the interests of others. But God incarnate is the ultimate. As part of his life on this earth he showed us how to go about the ancient path. The Psalms can only be our prayers because they were first the prayers of our faithful King. God is able to accept us because he rejected his Son. We never have to cry "My God My God! Why have you forsaken me?" because Jesus did.

I encourage you now to find communion with Christ in Psalms 20–24. Don't study them, as if to prove his existence or with the hope of teaching about his experience. No, simply meet him. Pray alongside Jesus in these psalms. Grieve with him in Psalm 22 as he saw the promises of Psalms 20–21 fail. Be comforted alongside him as Psalm 23 provides comfort. Hope with him as he must have sensed, through Psalm 24, the blessings on the horizon. We have so little of Jesus in our busy life, but praying his prayers is a way for us to experience communion with him. I invite you into that prayerful communion now.