



Introduction to the Psalms

The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible. As Israel's original songbook, it has been used by countless people throughout generations in both corporate and personal worship. And it has been a well-loved source of wisdom, comfort, and even sometimes rebuke.

But the beauty of the Psalms is the way that they don't shy away from incorporating all of life into the faith journey. The Psalms contain exactly what you would expect to find in a worship book; songs praising God for his goodness, for his power, for his majesty and for the things that he's done. But it also contains some things that you wouldn't expect to find in a worship book. It asks hard questions of God. It explores the depths of some of the darkest human experiences and has the audacity to ask where God is in the midst of those situations.

And far from being something that God discourages, it seems that God himself is open to this process, and even wants this process to take place. Because the beauty of the Psalms is that they reveal a God who invites us to jump into the arena with him, when things are good and when they aren't, when we understand and when we don't have a clue, when we trust him and when we're wondering where he is. The Psalms invite us to bear our whole lives before God in the faith journey.

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Week 1 Day 1

Read Psalm 1:1-2

In our contemporary, Western world, “instruction” is not always seen as a positive thing. Usually, it’s perceived as the response to when we have done something and need to be shown a better, more correct way of “being” or “doing.” And as such, when we approach the biblical text and read about the “law” of God and its “instruction”¹ we often get a negative connotation.

Yet those notions are directly confronted in the first two verses of Psalm 1. The one who finds blessing and happiness is the one who not only takes joy in but meditates on the law (instruction) of God, according to this passage. And it is those who disregard this instruction that find themselves outside of this happiness. And this is a significant point, though our cultural lenses that usually equate the concept of “law” with the negative restriction of freedom sometimes obscures us from seeing it. As Martin Klingbeil writes in the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, “*Torah* is the story of God’s actions in the human sphere communicated through history and instruction.”²

In other words, what God invites us to in Psalm 1 is not a blind devotion to a set of rules or ethics, but to participate in his ongoing interaction with the world. He invites us to see him not just as a high and mighty deity that stands over everything good and bad that we put blind faith in, but he reveals himself as a God who interacts with humanity, who *wrestles* with humanity. And rather than keeping him at distance as a disinterested deity, God invites us to a life of blessing as we enter into the arena where he is already at work among his creation.

Reflection

Why do you think that we usually see “law” and “instruction” as a negative thing? And how do you balance the positive statements about the law here with some of the things we see later on in the New Testament?

What do you think it means to “wrestle” with God as he acts in the human sphere?

¹ In Hebrew, *torah* is translated in this passage as both “law” and “instruction”

² Martin G. Klingbeil, *Psalms*, Andrews Bible Commentary: Old Testament (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2020), 662.

Week 1 Day 2

Read Psalm 1:3

It's easy to read through this Psalm and imagine the peaceful picture that it presents: a beautiful and strong tree, thriving next to a gentle stream. But if this presents a picture of beauty to us in our Western world where we have plenty of water sources and plenty of strong, growing trees, it's an even more poignant picture to consider in an arid, desert climate that produces few trees. As Martin Klingbeil says in the *Andrews Bible Commentary*, "in a predominantly dry climate, a tree is to be planted in a promising location – that is close to a water source – in order to thrive and be fruitful."³

And its important to keep in mind, this is all connected to the previous two verses contrasting the way of the wicked with the one who meditates on God's law, day and night. As we saw earlier, this is the step into wrestling with God's interaction with the world. And when viewed through this lens, this is an easy word picture to see in all of its beauty. Though this may be a life of wrestling with God, it's also a life where one can grow strong beside peaceful waters, rather than being blown around by the dry desert wind. And this is the life that God invites us to, a life that is peacefully rooted in him.

Reflection

What do you find significant about the picture of a strong, peaceful tree planted by a stream as it describes life lived with God?

What do you think it means to meditate on God's law day and night? Is there any fear that this could lead to a form of legalism?

³ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 662.

Week 1 Day 3

Read Psalm 1:4

Something that most people can agree on is that people who shift their personalities, opinions, views in order to fit in with various different crowds are difficult to be around on a consistent basis. And this is for the simple reason that these people are anything but consistent, and their constant shifting makes it nearly impossible to build a worthwhile relationship together because they have no moorings or roots with which you can build solidarity and find common ground.

And this is exactly the picture that the Psalmist paints of the “wicked” in Psalm 1, as opposed to those who are like trees planted by streams of water because they meditate on God’s law day and night. And it should be noted here, that explicitly lacking from the description of the wicked is their behavior. What seems to be talked about is not so much what they “do” or “don’t do,” but rather the fact that there is nothing rooting them down, so they are blown wherever the wind takes them.

And this is a powerful picture of what life looks like with God. With God, there is a groundedness and a rootedness to life. And just as the behavior of the wicked is never mentioned, it would seem that the Psalmist is implying that it is not the behavior of the righteous which grounds and roots them, but rather it is the belief that there is a definition of what is good, beautiful, right and wrong. It is the belief that life lived with God is a wrestling with his interaction with the world. And God calls us to not be blown like chaff, but to be rooted in him.

Reflection

Why is the wicked being blown as chaff such a powerful description for what it means to the Psalmist to be “wicked?”

Why do you think any specific behavior is left out of the Psalmists description of the wicked?

Week 1 Day 4

Read Psalm 1:5

For many of us, when we face difficult circumstances, the only way that we get through those circumstances is by relying on the values that we have or the beliefs that we hold about the world. If you believe in a future where God puts the world to rights, reconciles and forgives sinners and brings new creation, it affects how you view difficult situations that you encounter in life. Often, our being grounded results in what we believe about ourselves and about God.

This is why in Psalm 1, when it talks about the experience of the wicked, it talks about how they are unable to “stand” in the judgment. And while most of the time we would connect this terminology with being unable to withstand a scrutinizing discovery process, we should note that this whole Psalm revolves around the concepts of having roots against being blown like chaff. It would make sense that when the Psalmist paints this word picture of someone who is unable to stand before judgment, what they are referring to is someone who is without a foundation. It seems to mean someone who has nowhere to turn with nothing to stand on when they face difficult times.

And this seems to be making a profound point about what life with God actually looks like. It may not always be the serene picture of vs. 3 of a tree planted by water, but when difficult times come, there will be a foundation to stand on, with roots that grow deep.

Reflection

Why do you think that what we believe about the future affects how we deal with situations here and now? And what difficulty would that make for those who have no “foundation?”

What do you think it looks like to not have a foundation?

Week 1 Day 5

Read Psalm 1:6

In the 21st century, one of the things that plagues us the most is instant gratification. Because we live in a world of high speed internet and cell phone signal, we have become accustomed to having whatever we want or need a moment away. And though this has certainly made information far more accessible to the average person, it has also drastically decreased our capacity for patience. When we start something new, whether it's learning and instrument or starting a hobby, because of our culture of instant gratification, we want to be proficient quickly without having to put in the time to become proficient.

And it may not appear at the outset that this little verse in Psalms has anything to do with instant gratification, but when we examine it more closely, we discover that it paints a larger picture of a *journey*. The word that the NIV translates as "way" when talking about the way of the righteous as opposed to the way of the wicked is the Hebrew word *derek*, which in most cases means "road" or "journey."⁴ It implies something that is not instantaneous, but something that takes place over time. And what this small, single verse points to is not a journey where we have a moment with God and everything falls into place, but a *long* journey of give and take where the Lord watches over those who are faithful to him.

And this is the journey that the Psalms themselves invite us to take; a journey that engages with God not just in a moment, but over a lifetime.

Reflection

How do you think a culture of "instant gratification" affects the idea of discipleship?

Why do you think the prospect of a long journey with God might be more appealing to some people? And why might it be less appealing to others?

⁴ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 202.

Week 2 Day 1

Read Psalm 3

The picture of discipleship that is often painted in the 21st century church is smooth, peaceful, and serene. We envision following God as moments of private prayer and devotion that inform acts of virtue and faithfulness and public. And while these are certainly important and beautiful parts of the discipleship journey, one of the hallmarks of the Psalms is the way that they portray all of life as the arena in which we follow God. And Psalms 3-8 do this in a profound way, encapsulating many of the different seasons and emotions of life in the way that they relate to God, sometimes in ways that are surprising to our contemporary notions of discipleship.

And the first of these Psalms stands as a prominent example of the way the faith journey goes throughout all of life, the good and the bad. It's a Psalm that has its historical setting in David's struggle against his own Son, Absalom, who was trying to usurp his kingdom (2 Samuel 13-19). The Psalm begins not by downplaying the gravity of the situation, as our modern discipling journeys often do, but by acknowledging it. David notes that he *does* have many enemies and that those around him are doubting whether or not God will actually deliver him. But David, in vs. 5, asserts the fundamental truth of this particular block of Psalms: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me." That is, there is no part of life and no part of the faith journey that happens absent of God. God is there in the high moments of celebration, but he's also there when we're surrounded by enemies, to the point that everyone else doubts whether or not he will come through.

And this is an important point to make concerning the faith journey. It is not a journey where there is only good or a journey that will only be prevalent when there is good. This is a journey that follows us through all experiences of our lives, because it's lived with a God who is present in all of our circumstances.

Reflection

Why do you think there's a tendency to only focus on the positives in the discipleship journey?

What do you think a more holistic discipleship journey looks like without falling into constant despair?

Week 2 Day 2

Read Psalm 5

The opening verse of Psalm 5 contains a word that is prevalent all throughout the Biblical narrative, both in poetry and in prophecy, but that is largely missing from the faith vocabulary of the church today; lament. The first words in this particular Psalm are David's plea to God to hear his lament, his complaint. This is something that has become largely taboo within North American churches. The author Soong-Chan Rah notes that "the balance in Scripture between praise and lament is lost in the ethos and worldview of American evangelical Christianity with its dominant language of praise."⁵ And that balance between praise and lament is displayed beautifully in this particular Psalm.

David begins with the lament that there is evil in his world and around him. This is a beautiful thing in and of itself in that he does not look for a *solution* to evil, but simply laments that evil exists. But this is followed by the praise of a God, who because of his love, invites David into his house, to follow his ways, to set a path before him. Psalms of lament, which contain both complaint and praise show the tension of a life of faith. They show us that there are things in life and the world worth lamenting, and that there are things along the way in the faith journey that lead us to praise, *and that both of these things exist simultaneously with one another*. And particularly, Psalms of lament reveal to us a God who is not offended by our complaints or tries to hide himself from our scrutiny. He invites us to bring our complaints to him as well as our praises.

Reflection

Why do you think that for the most part, the church has largely moved away from the concept of lament?

How do you think we hold the concept of lament and praise together at the same time?

⁵ Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Wheaton: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 23.

Week 2 Day 3

Read Psalm 6

One of the hallmarks of Christian media in the Western world is a focus on positivity. And in the world in which we live, this is incredibly understandable. The experience of life can often be difficult, and so we want to focus on the good, the hopeful, the joyful so that the Christian experience can be a source of goodness in a world that is often difficult. But sometimes we have the tendency to overcorrect, and our focus on goodness and joy in the midst of difficulty can sometimes minimize the reality of difficulty that we will all experience at one point or another.

Yet in the Psalms, particularly in Psalm 6, we don't find a minimization of difficult times, but rather a plea to God through the midst of the difficulty. In fact, David does nothing in this Psalm to glaze over the things that he is experiencing; he describes them in detail to God. He talks about his soul being in anguish. He asks the open ended question, "how long?" He talks about how worn out he is from his experience. Martin Klingbeil notes "the extremity of the psalmists despair is expressed through a repeated hyperbole..."⁶

All of this is not an invitation for us to be constantly melancholy, or to display the Christian religion as one in which we are constantly afflicted. But rather, this is an acknowledgment that there are times in the journey of life and faith where we *will* experience melancholy and we will be afflicted. And it's the recognition that God does not leave us in these things, but that he journeys with us through these times. And God invites us to bring our experiences, all of our experiences, to him.

Reflection

Why do you think that we tend to minimize difficulty in regards to our faith?

What's the balance between being honest about our experience of difficulty and making our experience of faith only about difficulty? How do we live in tension between these two things?

⁶ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 667.

Week 2 Day 4

Read Psalm 7

It can get easy to be bogged down in Psalms 3-6 as they describe the difficult realities of life and the place that faith occupies within those realities. But the important thing to remember is that Psalms 3-8 represent a journey throughout *all* of the seasons of life. And Psalm 7 represents a certain trust in God that is borne out of the difficult experiences of the previous Psalms.

Like the Psalms that came before it, Psalm 7 begins with the acknowledgment that David is experiencing difficult times, claiming that his enemies are ready to devour him (vs. 1) and that they are raging against him (vs. 6). Historically, it's unclear whether David is talking about his experiences with Saul or Absalom,⁷ but it's understandable that he's talking about a situation where he is facing real enemies that are presenting real danger to him. But there is a shift that this Psalm makes that some of the previous Psalms do not. David declares in vs. 11 that God is a righteous judge and goes on to describe how he deals with the wicked, but this is acknowledged alongside the confession in vs. 3 that David himself may be among the wrongdoers.

What this Psalm reveals is a trust in God to vindicate and put a situation or an experience to right. It recognizes God as the superior judge and recognizes him as the source of good, opposed even to us when we're among the wrongdoers. This is a mature faith that recognizes God's goodness, even in the face of evil and difficulty, but it's a faith that has reached its maturity *because* it has gone through the difficult situations of Psalms 3-6. A mature faith that has learned to grapple with God through the difficult times recognizes that God's goodness will also reveal itself through all of our circumstances.

Reflection

How do you think we reach this level of trust with God where we can trust that he will do the right thing, even when we are wrong?

What do you think the difference is between mature faith and immature faith?

⁷ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 667.

Week 2 Day 5

Read Psalm 8

The sequence of Psalms 3-8 winds through lament and difficult personal times and ends in Psalm 8 with a beautiful and sweeping doxology of the goodness of God. Taken by itself, these are the things that we read to remind ourselves of God's glory, power and goodness. These things are on display in the heavens. The enormity of the universe shows God's power, but he still cares for people as his children. On its own, this is the picture that we usually carry of God when we think of his power and benevolence.

Yet these things mean even more when we consider the journey that this collection of Psalms has taken us on. We've journeyed through sleepless nights (Psalm 3:5), laments (Psalm 5:1), intense, emotional nights (Psalm 6:6) and wrongdoing (Psalm 7:3-5). And it's been through that journey with God's ever-faithful presence in the ups and downs, have we now gotten to the point where we can praise God for his goodness and his glory. All of this reveals a God who patiently bears with us through the journey, but it also reveals a discipleship that is willing to take the journey.

Eugene Peterson wrote that "there is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."⁸ These Psalms show us the beauty of the long apprenticeship and invite us into the life where we can take the journey of faith with God through all of our experiences.

Reflection

Why do we often want to rush right to Psalm 8 while skipping the experience of Psalm 3-7? Does it cheapen our experience of God?

What do you think the "long apprenticeship" with God looks like?

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2000), 16.

Week 3 Day 1

Read Psalm 52:1-7

For most of us, when we read Scripture we look for passages that talk about the patience, grace and mercy of God. And indeed, these are the central truths about God that we believe, and central truths that he himself has revealed (Exod. 33:19). Because of this, when we read passages like Psalm 52, we become a little bit troubled.

In the ways that we often talk of God, we talk about him wanting to win people over with love and patience. So it's a little jarring to see David say "surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin: he will snatch you up and pluck you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living" (vs. 5). It certainly doesn't line up with the God that we talk about most often and it certainly doesn't line up with Jesus' admonition to pray for our enemies.

And it would be foolish to approach a Psalm such as this thinking that we have an answer that can make up for everything or smooth everything over. But perhaps something that can begin the conversation is the fact that David is taking these feelings of his to God and not to the other person. David works through his difficulties with someone else first with God, rather than harboring resentment that turns into hate. And in this we see some of the beauty of the Psalms. They invite us to take all of our fears, frustrations, triumphs, joys, failures and difficulties to God. They invite us to open up all of our lives to the presence and action of God, even amongst those that we have difficulty with.

Reflection

How does it make you feel that David is asking God to do these horrible things to his enemies? What does it make you think about God?

Do you think that taking our struggles with other people to God helps us love our enemies as Jesus commanded?

Week 3 Day 2

Read Psalm 52:8-9

When most of us compare ourselves to people that we have a difficult time interacting with, we often see ourselves as the total, virtuous opposite. Where they make mistakes, we do the right thing. Where they have limited understanding, we know the things that they don't. Where they made a mistake, we know exactly what should have been done. It's easy to see ourselves as more knowing and more virtuous in these situations.

And in this Psalm, as David has just expressed his difficulty with another person to God, it's possible to read his response in such a way. Where David wants God to take the other person from their tent, he himself is safely tucked away in the house of God. It's possible to read this and see a bit of arrogance within it. However, the house of God as David knew it was largely a place of sacrifice. It was where you went when you had done something wrong. And far more than simply displaying the difference between David and this other person, where David is with God while the other person is on his own, it seems to reveal a humility that all of us should cultivate. When we accuse another person of wrongdoing or transgression, we should do so while also acknowledging that we ourselves are transgressors as well, in need of God's forgiveness.

This is not a call for us to live in silos where we can't acknowledge that another person has done wrong or transgressed in any way. But it is a call for us to always recognize another person's wrongdoing with humility as we consider our own, and a desire for them to be forgiven by God as we have been forgiven by God.

Reflection

How do you think a person can maintain humility themselves while acknowledging the wrongdoing of someone else?

How do you read this Psalm in light of what Jesus said about loving enemies?

Week 3 Day 3

Read Psalm 53:1-3

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's classic novel *The Idiot*, he examines what it would look like if a completely good-hearted, virtuous person were to encounter situations in which people would think he was unintelligent because of his goodness, leading to the title of the novel itself. And often, when we think about discipleship and the journey of faith, it would seem that we often think we should embody the same "idiocy" as the title character of Dostoevsky's novel. However, this psalm seems to challenge us in the opposite direction.

The fool, according to David in Psalm 53 is one who says that there is no God and lives according to his own ways and does not do any good, thus living virtuously. This is contrasted with vs. 2 where God looks upon the earth to see if there are any who have "understanding." And while this could certainly be construed as wisdom to a degree, it would seem that when read in context, those who "understand" are those who do the opposite of the fool. In this case, that would be those who "do good" and do not live according to their own corrupt and violent ways, but according to the ways in which God has shown them.

All throughout Scripture, wisdom is spoken of as a thing to be desired and sought far above others. And as the Proverbs beautifully put it, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10)." And wisdom, it would seem, is to order our lives around the goodness of God as he has revealed himself.

Reflection

Why do you think there's an emphasis put on the fool as someone who does not do good?

How do you think seeking God and understanding go hand in hand?

Week 3 Day 4

Read Psalm 53:4-6

When I was a toddler, one of my earliest memories was being afraid to get up at night to use the bathroom because my sister told me that at night, when all of the lights were off, there was a bear in the shower in the bathroom that we shared. As I got older I realized that my sister had not been telling the truth and that I was afraid of something that wasn't there and wasn't necessary for me to fear.

And something similar happens in this Psalm with the "fool," who declared in vs. 1 that there was no God. One of the things that is mentioned about them in vs. 5 is that they are overwhelmed with dread where there is nothing to dread. And this paints a much different picture than the confident assertion that we saw earlier on in this chapter, where the fool disregards God and his ways to live according to his own dictates. It's easy to talk about the effect that living in such a way will have on the world and on the people around them, and often we find ourselves talking about such people from a religious point of view. In our world it's easy to talk about shifting cultural values, the normalization of things that at certain times in history were not normal, and the church has talked very loudly about this. But what we don't often do is examine the effect that such things have on the part of those who espouse them. And often we don't examine the effect that such cultural battles have on us.

If the dread of what shouldn't be dreaded is characteristic of the fool who says in their heart that there is no God, then the characteristic of the wise who follow God's ways should be a lack of dread or a lack of fear over what doesn't need to be feared. These are the Psalms calling us to a wisdom that puts our faith and security in God and for us not to be afraid of the things that we don't need to fear.

Reflection

Why do you think it's so easy to dread things where there is truly nothing to dread?

Why do you think that our own self-confidence, like the fool the Psalm describes, often leads to fear? Was it rooted in fear in the first place?

Week 3 Day 5

Read Psalm 54

In the part of the world in which we live, with our philosophical underpinnings and our literary history, we tell stories in a very particular, linear way. We start with introductory material to people, places and circumstances, then we add new details, new circumstances and we usually end on the main point that we've been trying to make. We watch movies, TV shows, and read books in order to get to the end. But the Hebrew mindset that produced the Psalms have a much different way of writing. In Hebrew, the main point often comes in the middle of the story.

And that is exactly what happens with this particular Psalm. The main point of the Psalm is verse 4⁹: "surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me." And if we miss this point, then we would miss the beauty that this Psalm is trying to convey to us. If we read it the way that we read most of our stories, we would pay attention to the beginning and the end; the beginning which is praying for deliverance from evil foes, and the end which results in praise and worship of God. But both of these things revolve around human activity.

The point of this Psalm, and indeed the point of the Christian journey is not about what we do, but about what God does. This Psalm is not about human enemies or human rejoicing, it is about God stepping in on behalf of his people. And when we make it about God rather than us, then along with David in this Psalm we can expect deliverance from our enemies and rejoicing when God acts.

Reflection

Why do we have a tendency in the faith journey to make things about ourselves rather than God?

⁹ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 699.

What is the balance between faith being about God and the fact that we exercise faith?

Week 4 Day 1

Read Psalm 88:1-5

One of the defining traits of “small talk” in our part of the world is that when someone asks us how we’re doing, usually, regardless of how we’re actually doing, we’ll answer by saying “fine.” When I was in high school, my class had a German exchange student who was bewildered by this American custom and found himself confused when someone asked how he was doing and was then taken aback by his honest, long-winded answer. But the truth is, many times we have a tendency to gloss over our actual condition in order to point to something a little more cheerful. And we especially do this in church situations where we are expected to be happy and joyful.

And while happiness and joy are beautiful things to strive for, the beauty of the Psalms is that they express a faith that is not only relegated to the joyful. The first five verses of Psalm 88 express an experience of despair. Whether it’s physical or mental, we don’t know, but the author describes an experience of being close to death, to the point that he feels forgotten about God. There are some who have noticed the similarity in language of this Psalm when read alongside the book of Job,¹⁰ an experience where another of God’s faithful was also feeling cut off from God.

The truth of the matter is that sometimes in our western expressions of Christianity, we’re not sure how to deal with some of the more difficult episodes of our life as they relate to faith. But the first step we can make in approaching this problem is to do exactly what the author of this Psalm does and express ourselves in completely honesty to God.

Reflection

Why do think that “church culture” struggles with Psalms such as this?

¹⁰ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 718.

What do you think it means to express ourselves in complete honesty to God? Why do you think there may be a hesitancy for some to do this, even though we believe God already knows our experience?

Week 4 Day 2

Read Psalm 88:6-9

The problem of evil is the main stumbling block that many in our world have when it comes to faith in God. This problem expresses itself in the age-old question: “if God is all-powerful and all good, why is there so much evil in the world?” Why doesn’t God step in and stop all of it? And while those questions are much bigger than can even begin to be answered in a short page, and while many good books have been written that attempt to just begin answering this question,¹¹ something that we *can* say is that the author of Psalm 88 had the same questions that we do.

One of the more jarring aspects of this Psalm is not just the way that the author talks about the difficult experiences that they are going through, but the fact that they are attributing those difficulties to God. “*You* have put me in the lowest pit...” (vs. 6); “*You* have overwhelmed me with all your waves...” (vs.7); “*You* have taken from me my closest friends...” (vs. 8). The author is incredibly clear in their intention here that they are not just complaining about their circumstances in general, they are blaming God specifically for their circumstances.

And I think there is a degree to which we struggle with this line of reasoning. The way that we portray God is that he is the answer to these things and not the cause of them. But perhaps what can be suggested here, to merely *begin* what is certainly a lifelong conversation, is that what this Psalm is portraying is a God who is big enough and patient enough for us to vent our frustration to him. Perhaps it’s not sacrilegious or blasphemous to take this raw anger, frustration and hurt to God. And maybe the way that we begin addressing these things in our lives and in our world is by first going to God.

Reflection

How does it make you feel that the author of this Psalm blames God for his problems? Does it make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

¹¹ For example, N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Why do you think the reality of evil is a hindrance for so many people in the faith journey? Is it because we have portrayed something wrongly?

Week 4 Day 3

Read Psalm 88:10-12

We all have various aspects of ourselves that we think make up the core of who we are. We build our identity around these things and we rightfully become fiercely protective of those values. And when someone questions those values, we find ourselves either immensely hurt or angry that someone could ignore or question something that we see as so integral to ourselves.

But something that is not evident in the English rendering of Psalm 88 is that this questioning of core identity is exactly what the author the Psalm is doing to God. He questions God's faithfulness (vs. 11), and his righteous deeds (vs. 12). But most pressingly, he questions God's love in the beginning of verse 11. And this is not just love of any variety, but a love that is specifically God's unique love. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*, which God uses to describe himself in Exodus 34, and a love which can be described as that which refuses to quit, even when it should. John Peckham helpfully describes *hesed* as that which "goes far beyond responsibilities and reasonable expectations (covenant, moral or otherwise)."¹² And this is precisely what the author of this Psalm is questioning. They're asking if God is really who he is claimed to be and if his identity is really steeped in these things that he has claimed.

Yet what we see in this Psalm is a God who does not necessarily take offense to being questioned as we would take offense when our core values are doubted. And perhaps this is something that comes from the security of a relationship. In the midst of the darkness of this Psalm, what it portrays in the background is a relationship between God and humanity that is so secure that it is comfortable asking these questions.

Reflection

¹² John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 82-83. Peckham also quotes Donald Gowan here, helpfully stating that *hesed* "cannot be adequately translated by anything short of a paragraph." Peckham, *The Love of God*, 82.

If we're uncomfortable having our identity markers questioned, why do you think that the Bible shows God having his questioned?

How do you think you can become so secure with God that you can talk to him in this way?

Week 4 Day 4

Read Psalm 88:13-14

In many of the other lament Psalms that we have read, there always seems to be a shift in tone at some point in the Psalm, going from the language of complaint to a more hopeful tone that God will be faithful, that God will keep his promises and that the dark times will give way to better things. And throughout the first twelve verses of this Psalm, we've seen the usual complaint language, which would lead to us expect the shift in this particular Psalm as well.

And maybe we expect that upon first reading verse 13. It signifies the move from the darkness to the language of prayer, which usually changes the tone of the whole Psalm, but then verse 14 shatters that expectation. As Klingbeil notes in his commentary on the Psalms, "the phrase 'in the morning' (v. 13) introduces the last section of the psalm, but instead of referring to God's favor that so often comes in the morning (cf. Pss. 5:3; 30:5; 45:6), there is only a return to suffering."¹³

And for many of us, this is a disturbing part of Scripture that we're not quite sure what to do with. Because we believe in a God who in the end does resolve everything and does put everything to rights. We believe, along with the Gospel of John, that the "light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). But perhaps one of the purposes of this Psalm is to remind us that in the business and life and faith, not every answer is an easy answer. And beyond that, maybe all of our questions won't have answers in this life. But what God invites us to do is to remain on the journey.

Reflection

What is your immediate reaction to this text, where it seems that an answer is coming from God, but then doesn't?

¹³ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 719.

How do you remain on a journey when there are questions that may not have an answer?

Week 4 Day 5

Read Psalm 88:15-18

When I was in my early twenties, I went through a period where I consumed all of Ernest Hemingway's books. One of the things that I found really fascinating about his writing were the endings of his stories, because they aren't truly "endings" as we would describe them. They are usually what I would describe as "moments between," where momentous things have happened, and the consequences of those things are about to play out, but Hemingway always cuts the story just before they do and prefers that we live with an implied ending. And in doing so, we're forced to live in that very moment with the characters.

And reflecting on the last verses of Psalm 88 seems to give the same impression. For the hope that we have in God, we look forward to the resolution of darkness. We look forward to our difficult situations being resolved. We look forward to the world around us being put to right with God's justice. The beauty of the Christian faith is that we expect these things that God has promised. And as such, we expect the darkness of Psalm 88 to be resolved in that hopeful expectation. But much like Hemingway, the Psalm leaves that ending implied and leaves us to exist in the moment.

And perhaps there's a bit of lost wisdom in this, because often the optimism of our faith pushes us to look on to the end at the expense of the moment. We look forward to the hopeful end to not experience the difficulty in the moment. But perhaps what the text is reminding us here is that it's ok to experience that momentary difficulty, even when you believe in a better ending. It's alright to be disheartened by the darkness of the world around us, while believing that the darkness has not overcome the light. And as with all of the Psalms, it's an invitation to wrestle with all of these things with God, rather than away from him.

Reflection

How do you think we can wrestle with the difficult moments in our lives in healthy ways?

Why do we often want to avoid the difficult situations life presents us to go right to the good ending God has promised us?

Week 5 Day 1

Read Psalm 91

We live in a world where there are constantly things around us that frighten us. From living through a pandemic, to civil unrest in our own country, to wars in other countries that threaten to pull in other world powers and become truly destructive on a large scale, there is much to fear. Yet these things are nothing new in our world and have been experienced by people for thousands of years. There were wars, disease and civil unrest to be afraid of in the ancient near east as well.

But Psalm 91 is a declaration of faith in God for protection in the midst of all of these fearful things around us. It begins with a call to “dwell in the shelter of the Most High... in the shadow of the Almighty” (vs. 1). Most authors view this as temple imagery¹⁴ where the faithful person is invited to take refuge, both within the building itself, or as Robert Alter implies, within the *shekinah* glory itself.¹⁵ And in doing so, this is when fear of war vanishes (vs. 5), fear of disease disappears (vs. 6) and the fear of constant danger is no longer present (vs. 7).

It may seem like a simple thing, but to choose to place hope and faith in God in the midst of fear and difficulty can be an incredibly challenging thing because we’re wired to pay attention to fear in order to protect ourselves. But faith that can trust God above all fear, that can trust God in the midst of the difficult situations we’ve seen earlier throughout the Psalms, is a faith that can express itself in the beautiful language of Psalm 91. And it can do so because it is faith that has been vindicated by God in real experiences.

¹⁴ Robert Alter: *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007), 322. Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 721.

¹⁵ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 322.

Reflection

As people of faith, how do you think we should relate to fearful situations in the world around us?

How do we have faith in the midst of fear that doesn't trivialize real danger?

Week 5 Day 2

Read Psalm 92

This particular Psalm is one that should be near and dear to those of us who believe in the goodness of the Sabbath because it is a Psalm that was written especially for worship on the Sabbath.¹⁶ Robert Alter goes so far as to say that it was not just a Psalm celebrating the goodness of the Sabbath, but one that was actively used in the Temple for rites and services on the Sabbath day.¹⁷ And as such, a careful examination of what this Psalm praises about God also informs us of the goodness of what we celebrate on Sabbath.

Upon immediate notice is the love and faithfulness of God mentioned in verse 2. Whereas in our exploration of Psalm 88, the Psalmist claims that these were absent, on Sabbath they are on full display. But this has to be paired with what is seen in verse 5; the love and faithfulness of God are seen by his deeds and what his hands have done. This is fundamental to a good theology of worship; worship is always a response to what God has done.

For many of us, our weekly worship has become a routine or a habit, or just something that we “do,” because we feel like we’re supposed to. But perhaps worship would take on a more robust meaning in our lives if we realized that every aspect of it, from the songs that we sing out loud, to the prayers that we pray, to the offerings that we give, to the Scripture that we read and hear; all of these are a response to what God has already done in us and for us.

¹⁶ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 721.

¹⁷ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 325.

Reflection

How do we purposefully view worship as a response? Would it change the way that we worship or how we feel when we do worship?

Why do you think that it can be easy to just settle into a routine of weekly worship?

Week 5 Day 3

Read Psalm 101

For much of Christianity in the Western world, there is a fine line in our ethical vision between personal morality and public morality. For the most part, we espouse the desire for public and civil morality when it comes to ethical issues that are important to us, but in other ways, we're willing to overlook a person's vices and often chalk it up to their own personal morality which may differ from ours. In fact, there have been some that have questioned the ethical vision of evangelical Christianity as it relates to political power.¹⁸

But this Psalm is a corrective to our sometimes lackadaisical approach to the moral vision of Christianity. While there have been numerous interpretations over the years for what it means to be "blameless" and how the idea of holiness relates to the idea of God's unmerited grace¹⁹ what this Psalm reiterates is that for those who follow and worship God, the moral vision of this God is non-negotiable. It's significant as well that in this Psalm the inspiration for blamelessness is the "love" of God. This is the Hebrew word *hesed*, mentioned above as God's love which doesn't quit when it should. Meaning that the desire for a holy, upright life isn't the result of some duty or commitment, but rather a real experience with God's love that has forgiven and stuck with us even when we've done wrong.

¹⁸ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 297-298.

¹⁹ John M.G. Barclay dedicates an entire chapter to the history of how this is interpreted in his book *Paul & The Gift* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2015).

This Psalm is a reminder to us that the moral vision of Christianity matters. And it's not an ethical construct that is there simply to reinforce what we think is better than everything else. It's a life that has been formed in response to God's own love.

Reflection

What do you think the balance is between personal vices and public morality? How can we be people who believe in holiness while being gracious and merciful at the same time?

How do you interpret the idea of "blamelessness" in this passage?

Week 5 Day 4

Read Psalm 102:1-11

Many times, the small print superscriptions at the beginning of the Psalms are unimportant for our reading. They say things like "a Psalm of David" or "a Psalm of Asaph" or "for the Director of Music." Usually these superscriptions are about who wrote the Psalm. And because we're really only familiar to David, we don't pay much attention to many of the others. But in this particular Psalm is unique in its superscription²⁰ in that it notes that it is written by an unknown person. And in this, it seems to make the Psalm more relatable because it is not necessarily the experience of a king or a temple director of music, but the experience of a normal person.

And the Psalm begins as a typical lament Psalm would, noting the futility of the days and the physical toll that sorrow is taking on this person. Some commentators even compare the suffering mentioned here to that experienced by Job.²¹ But these laments are not the laments of kings in cushy palaces, begging for forgiveness because they've used their power in harmful and irresponsible ways, such as when David begs for forgiveness in Psalm 51. These are the laments of a regular person experiencing the regular difficulties of life.

²⁰ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 727.

²¹ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 353.

And this is one of the beautiful things about the Psalms. Not only do they encompass the whole of life, both good and bad, but they demonstrate that the up and down nature of life is common to kings and to anonymous people. The Psalms demonstrate that the human condition reaches us all, regardless of status or condition. And they also reveal that God is the same God for both kings and regular people.

Reflection

Do you think there's a difference between the lament of a king and the lament of a common person?

Lament Psalms in general can be difficult to digest as it relates to our worship of God. Do you think lament Psalms have a place in our worship today?

Week 5 Day 5

Read Psalm 102:12-28

The last lament Psalm that we looked at together did not make the expected move to the positive and the hopeful tone, believing that God would intervene and rescue the person and their situation. However, this Psalm does exactly that.

And the two sections of the Psalm itself contrast one another in profound ways. The beginning of the Psalm paints a picture of the temporality of things. Days are like smoke (vs. 3), hearts wither like grass (vs. 4), in their despair, the author of this Psalm is like an owl living among ruins (vs. 6). Yet in this second section, temporality is replaced with a sense of permanence. God sits on his throne forever (vs. 12), God will rebuild Zion (vs. 16), though everything else perishes, God will remain (vss. 26-27). But perhaps the most indicative phrase that indicates the shift from that which can be destroyed to that which endures is the very last word of the Psalm. Though the NIV renders the phrase "their descendants will be established before you," the word established is better translated as "firm" or "unshaken." Robert Alter translates this verse as "The sons of Your servants dwell safe, their seed in Your presence, unshaken."²²

²² Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 357.

This is the sense that this Psalm is trying to leave us with: everything in our lives may be shifting and temporary. The days may disappear like smoke, but the one, sure, unshakable thing is the presence and goodness of God. And this Psalm invites us to lament the temporary things, but then it invites us to turn to that which is unshakeable.

Reflection

How do we think we can effectively balance lament for the temporary and praise for God's permanence as this Psalm invites us to do?

Do you think that a lament is more meaningful if it makes the shift to the hopeful as this Psalm does, or if it allows space for despair, as Psalm 88 did?

Week 6 Day 1

Read Psalm 148:1-6

Last winter on a cold Saturday night, my daughter discovered an app on my wife's phone that you could point at the night sky and it would tell you if you were looking at a planet or a star and then it would identify which one you were looking at. It was fun to see how amazed she was at learning the unknown, because that is largely what the "heavens" have been for humankind for a long time. We know more about them now than we ever have in the history of the world, but they're still a mystery. And the Psalms retain this bit of mystery when it comes to the heavens as well. Psalm 8:3-4 famously states "when I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"

And in our present Psalm, though the heavens remain vast and mysterious, the thing that they hold in common with humanity and that which is less mysterious is that they too praise God in his majesty. This Psalm is designed to paint an enormous, majestic picture of who God is to the point that even that which is most mysterious and unexplored to us – the heavens – are also the realm of God's rule. They may represent ultimate mystery to us, but to God they are just another thing that gives him praise.

The point of this Psalm is to not only point out the grandeur and majesty of God, but to remind those singing it or using it for worship that the God who created the vast, unexplored heavens also cares deeply for them and gives them his attention and love.

Reflection

How do we relate to the grandeur of God (his transcendence) while also holding in tension the fact that he notices us and loves us (his immanence)?

What do you think about the idea of “mystery” in the faith journey?

Week 6 Day 2

Read Psalm 148:7-14

A few summers ago we had so many strong storms that there were three separate events where trees came down on the church property. And for me, it created a sense of the unpredictability of predictable events. I’ve seen wind, storms, etc. for all of my life. But sometimes you are reminded that the things that you are familiar with are more powerful than you sometimes expect them to be. And this is what the second half of Psalm 148 is written to portray. The first half of the Psalm appealed to that which is mysterious and impossible to comprehend to display God’s glory. This part of the Psalm appeals to that which is familiar, but also unpredictably powerful to display God’s glory.

The Psalm specifically mentions “great sea creatures and all ocean depths” (vs. 7). For us this would just refer to the large and sometimes dangerous animals that live in the ocean, but for God’s people who wrote this Psalm, this had a prominent theological meaning as well. In the ancient Near East in general, giant sea monsters were usually used to portray chaos and unpredictability.²³ For Israel in particular, the sea itself represents the chaos that God tamed in

²³ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 757.

creation.²⁴ The message is fairly clear: that which is known, but still chaotic and dangerous has been tamed by God and even gives praise to this God. This Psalm paints a picture of a God who knows the vast unknowable and who tames the chaotic and unpredictable, but the crowning line of this poem is in vs. 14. In all of his power and mystery, he keeps his people close to his heart.

This Psalm is a beautiful reminder that in all of God's mystery and in all of God's power, he still sees the small, minute details of our lives, and he is still attentive to us.

Reflection

One of the prominent descriptors of God as creator in the Old Testament is as one who tames the chaos. How does this relate to the circumstances in which we find ourselves and our world?

Chaos is often dangerous and this Psalm portrays God as more powerful than the chaos itself. How do we relate to a God who is powerful enough to calm that which is incredibly dangerous to us?

Week 6 Day 3

Read Psalm 149:1-5

One of the interesting experiences of the stage of life in which I find myself is seeing the clothes, music and style that was popular when I was a teenager now being classified as "vintage," or "oldies." It's an experience that many people before me have gone through, and it's an experience that many people after me will go through because it's part of being human and experiencing the progression of time. But often we have a sort of soft spot for cultural artifacts, and we want everyone else to experience them the same way that we did. And often this makes its way into our faith in a variety of ways, from the way that we dress in worship, to the type of music that is played, to what we think should or shouldn't belong in worship. And while this is understandable, what can often end up happening is that our worship becomes frozen in the cultural language and cultural milieu of a specific time and can become irrelevant or even out of reach for those who speak with a different cultural language.

But this Psalm seems to be a corrective to that way of thinking. Immediately, we spot cultural artifacts of Israel's worship in this Psalm that were unique to them. We don't use a timbrel or harp in our worship (vs. 3), but Israel did. We don't often incorporate dancing into

²⁴ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 510.

Adventist worship, but it's clear that Israel did. And perhaps most telling is in verse 1 where it instructs Israel to "sing to the LORD a new song."

The beauty of a God who has chosen to reveal himself is that while there is mystery, while there are things that we do not understand, he has still chosen to reveal himself in our flesh, in our language, in our experience. And because of this, our worship should happen in ways that are sensible to our language and our experience. This is call that the Psalms make to every successive generation of believers to express their worship to God in their own cultural language. It's a call to current and younger generations to be creative as they faithfully create new ways to worship God that are both faithful and theologically accurate. And it's a call to those of us whose cultural language may be vintage to give grace and space for others to sing to the LORD a new song.

Reflection

What do you think it means to praise God in our own cultural language?

Why are we sometimes resistant when worship of God takes on a cultural language that we are unfamiliar with?

Week 6 Day 4

Read Psalm 149:6-9

One of the things that Christianity has to answer for in our modern world is our violent and persecutory past. From the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition and some of the missionary work that "converted" entire cultures on threat of violence, it's certainly understandable that some people see a gap between our confession of an all-good and loving God with our violent past. And as such, some parts of the Bible become difficult to read with our past in mind, and the second half of Psalm 149 is such an instance.

The Psalm has moved from the language of singing a new song to God in whatever cultural language we use to now talking about those who worship and praise God bearing a "double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples" (vss. 6-7). It's a disturbing picture to us where praise of God in the temple has lead to violence against other people. However, when we examine this text more closely, it seems to be painting a much different picture than what appears on the outset. Specifically, the Hebrew phrase for "double-edged sword" is not literal, but rather a Hebrew idiom which literally

translates to “a sword of mouths.”²⁵ Thus, what seems to be the weapon of choice in this Psalm is not literally a weapon of war, but rather our mouths and the things that we say. This would connect back as well to verse 1 where Israel is invited to sing a new song. It would seem that the things that show Israel’s might in the world is not their power with weapons, but the witness that their mouths give to the goodness of God.

And perhaps in our world as well, this is a call for the church to shift our witness from that of power and dominance to using our words and our witness to declare God’s goodness.

Reflection

How do we think we begin to start reconciling some of the more violent parts of Scripture with some of the horrible things that our religion has done in the past?

What do you think it means to defeat someone with “The sword of mouths” as it says here?

Week 6 Day 5

Read Psalm 150

Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, written over a long period of time by several different authors addressing a multitude of situations and people. It was a worship book for God’s people throughout the centuries. It begins with a beautiful picture of the peacefulness of life when God is kept at its center, and here in the final chapter it closes with a beautiful doxology calling for praise to God.

Each verse of Psalm 150 begins with the call to “praise.” The Hebrew word used here is where we get our common word of praise “hallelujah” (literally meaning “praise Yahweh”). In in this Psalm, there are 10 hallelujah’s given to God. As Martin Klingbeil notes, “they all build in a crescendo to a final cosmic invitation for everything that has breath to ‘praise the LORD.’”²⁶ And with this final cosmic invitation, we see the result of a multitude of individual things that have been praising the Lord. From the individual praising in his sanctuary, to the multitudes of the

²⁵ Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 513.

²⁶ Klingbeil, *Psalms*, 758.

heavens, for the players of the trumpets, harps, lyres, the dancers, those clanging cymbals together, each in their own way praise God for his goodness. And it is with each of these individual acts of praise that the entire cosmos itself is invited to give praise to God.

The final Psalm is a beautiful recognition that God reigns supreme over all things and that because of this, all things are invited to give him praise. But this also contains the implied message that humanity, though we occupy a beautiful and special place within creation, is part of a larger whole. But as such, God empowers us in our unique circumstances, with our unique abilities and with our unique gifts to give him praise. And God invites us to join in the chorus with all of creation in recognizing his goodness.

Reflection

What do you think it means to give God praise in our own unique ways?

How does “everything that has breath,” human or not, praise God?

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