

Learning to Pray the Psalms

The psalms reflect the whole range of human experience, from agony to ecstasy, & they speak with a sharp directness & honesty. Though these songs originated many centuries ago in a semitic culture, they express the pain & hope, misery & confidence of men & women of any age & land. Most importantly for prayer, the same Spirit who inspired the psalmists is with us & in us, to move our own hearts & minds as he first moved the psalmist. As we pray the psalms our heart is opened to the emotions which stirred the psalmist, both joy & anguish, praise & confession.

The Poetry of the Psalms

Poetry is very different from prose. The rhythm & metre of poetry are part of the meaning, because they determine the emphasis given to particular words. Poetry translated from one language into another often loses its unique power, but in the case of the poetry of the OT we are very fortunate because the basic structure of Hebrew poetry survives translation & can be clearly picked up in English. Knowing something about the shape of Hebrew poetry can help us to understand the movement & development of thought in a psalm.

The basic rhythm of Hebrew poetry is a rhythm of meaning, & is called parallelism. Parallelism means that in any single verse the thought of the second line runs parallel to the first. The second line echoes the first. E.g.:

*O praise the Lord, all you nations
Acclaim him all you peoples (Ps 117)*

*The Lord's is the earth & its fullness
The world & all its people (Ps 24)*

There are many different kinds of parallelism, three of the most common are:

1. *Repetitive parallelism* – technically known as synonymous parallelism – where the second line simply repeats the first. The two examples just quoted are repetitive parallelism.
2. *Contrasting parallelism* – also known as antithetic parallelism, where the second line makes a contrast with the first. E.g.

*Some trust in chariots or horses
But we in the name of the Lord.
They will collapse & fall,
But we shall hold & stand firm (Ps 20)*

3. *Complementary parallelism* – or synthetic parallelism - where the second line complements, develops or fills out the meaning of the first line. E.g.:

*If the Lord does not build the house
In vain do its builders labour. (Ps 127)*

Understanding the different types of parallelism enables us to enter into the vibrant stream of thought flowing through a psalm.

The other main feature of Hebrew poetry is its metre, where a pattern of accented syllables gives the psalm a strong beat. Metre is obviously lost in translation from one language to another, but the Grail version of the psalms in English tries to reproduce something of the beat of Hebrew poetry.

The Setting of the Psalms

Most of the psalms appear at first sight to be poems written by & for an individual, & that's often how we understand them. In fact the reverse is true. The primary setting of the psalms is not individual but community prayer, liturgical prayer, the prayer of the Temple liturgy. Even those psalms which most intensely portray the anguish or thanksgiving of an individual were used in Israel's liturgy. That's why they are in the Book of Psalms. The psalms teach us that individual & community prayer are not two radically different ways of praying. Community prayer can be intensely personal, even though it's not private. The psalms express the deepest movements of the soul in words that are designed to be prayed in common in the great congregation, not in private. When prayed in private, alone, the psalms by their very nature join us to the whole body of Christ.

Types of Psalms

There are many ways of analysing the different types of psalms, but most of them can be put into two main groups: psalms of praise & psalms of lament.

Psalms of Praise

The psalms of praise fall into two groups, each reflecting a different style of praise, descriptive or declarative.

Descriptive praise means that the psalm offers praise to God by describing who he is & what he has done, *at all times & in all places*. These psalms praise God for the broad sweep of his actions in history. E.g. Ps 113:

Praise, O servants of the LORD;

praise the name of the LORD.

May the name of the LORD be blessed

both now & for evermore

From the rising of the sun to its setting

praised be the name of the LORD!

From the dust he lifts up the lowly,

from his misery he raises the poor

to set him in the company of princes,

yes, with the princes of his people.

Declarative praise means that the psalm declares God's greatness because of his *unique action* in the life of the nation or of an individual. This second group of psalms of praise is more particular & at times more personal in its praise than those in the first group.

Ps 124 is a classic example of a psalm which declares God's power active in saving Israel from the particular threat of destruction in the Exile to Babylon.

*Blessed be the LORD who did not give us
a prey to their teeth!
Our life, like a bird, has escaped
from the snare of the fowler.*

*Indeed the snare has been broken
& we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the LORD
who made heaven & earth.*

Ps 30 is an example of a psalm which declares God's mercy active in saving an individual:

*I will praise you, LORD, you have rescued me
& have not let my enemies rejoice over me...*

*Sing psalms to the LORD, you who love him,
give thanks to his holy name.*

Setting

The psalms of praise are the prayers of God's people at worship in the Temple. The liturgy of the Temple & the festivals of Israel proclaimed the great events of Israel's salvation, & the psalms of praise of the people were the people's response to this revelation. A psalm like Ps 118 was sung by the congregation at the Feast of Tabernacles.

The setting of the psalms of praise of the individual is still the worship of the Temple. But the focus is not on God's salvation of the nation but on his salvation of the individual. God's goodness to Israel was shown not only in the great events of her history, but also in his constant care for each person. An individual would give thanks to God for a personal deliverance (from illness or injustice) by bringing an offering to the priest. As the victim was sacrificed in the Temple a psalm would be recited as a public acknowledgement of the Lord's help, & the worshippers would be invited to join in the sacrificial meal. This is the setting of Ps 116.

How can I repay the LORD

*for his goodness to me?
The cup of salvation I will raise;
I will call on the LORD'S name.*

*My vows to the LORD I will fulfill
before all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.*

Themes

The main themes of the psalms of praise sung at Israel's festivals are the themes of creation & redemption: God at work in nature, & God at work in saving his people, especially in the Exodus.

Those psalms which give thanks have a wide variety of themes: thanks for peace & prosperity, & thanks for deliverance from sickness, enemies, injustice or death.

Pattern

The psalms of praise all have a similar pattern: call to praise, reasons for praise, call to praise. Ps 33 is an example of a psalm of praise which takes up the theme of God's power in creation & in the Exodus. The call to praise begins the psalm:

*Ring out your joy to the LORD, O you just;
for praise is fitting for loyal hearts.*

Then comes the main body of the psalm, revealing the reasons why we should praise the lord – for his wonders in nature & creation, & for his wonders revealed in Israel's history:

*For the word of the LORD is faithful
& all his works to be trusted...*

*By his word the heavens were made,
by the breath of his mouth all the stars.
He collects the waves of the ocean;
he stores up the depths of the sea...*

*A king is not saved by his army,
nor a warrior preserved by his strength.
A vain hope for safety is the horse;
despite its power it cannot save.*

*The LORD looks on those who revere him,
on those who hope in his love,
to rescue their souls from death,*

to keep them alive in famine.

Finally, the call to praise is repeated & a brief prayer is offered:

*May your love be upon us, O LORD
As we place all our hope in you.*

Another example of a psalm of praise which takes as its theme God's wonders in creation & in Israel's history is Ps 98. It begins with a call to praise:

Sing a new song to the LORD

& immediately goes on to give the reasons for praise,

*for he has worked wonders.
His right hand & his holy arm
have brought salvation.*

*The LORD has made known his salvation;
has shown justice to the nations.
He has remembered his truth & love
for the house of Israel.*

Ps 32 is a good example of a psalm of praise which takes up the experience of an individual. The psalm begins:

*Happy the man whose offence is forgiven,
whose sin is remitted.
O happy the man to whom the LORD
imputes no guilt,
in whose spirit is no guile.*

Then it goes on to the reason for thanksgiving:

*But now I have acknowledged my sins;
my guilt I did not hide.
I said: "I will confess
my offence to the LORD."
& you, LORD, have forgiven
the guilt of my sin.*

The psalm ends with the call to praise:

*Rejoice, rejoice in the LORD
exult, you just!
O come, ring out your joy,
all you upright of heart.*

Sometimes the psalms of praise (like this one) are not addressed to God but are psalms about God to be sung in his presence & in the presence of his people.

Praying the Psalms of Praise

The scriptures urge us “*to give thanks to God in all circumstances*” (Eph 5:20), & the psalms of praise & thanksgiving help us to do that. When our circumstances are joyful the psalms of praise turn our joy into worship & enable us to praise the one who is the source of all joy.

When our circumstances are difficult & trying, how can we pray the psalms of praise? In difficult times, praying the psalms of praise pulls us out of ourselves & enables us to live in the light of God’s presence, guided by the one who makes “*all things work for good for those who love him*” (Rom 8:28).

If we are depressed & the psalm we are praying is a psalm of praise we can pray the psalm for someone else, someone who is joyful, as a way of sharing their experience, as a way of learning to “*rejoice with those who rejoice*” (Rom 12:15). It can be helpful to think of someone we know who is rejoicing, & pray with them in mind as we pray the psalm.

Psalms of Lament

Psalms of lament are by far the most common type in the Scriptures.

Setting & Themes

Some of these psalms are psalms of national lament, expressing the cry of the people in times of national disaster. Ps 77 is a good example:

*I cry aloud to God,
cry aloud to God that he may hear me.*

*“Will the LORD reject us for ever?
Will he show us his favour no more?
Has his love vanished for ever?
Has his promise come to an end?
Does God forget his mercy
or in anger withhold his compassion?”*

But most of the psalms of lament reflect the cry of an individual suffering some private grief, either sickness, the attack of enemies, or the consequences of personal sin.

Psalms of lament usually begin by calling on God for his help. E.g. Ps 51:

*Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offence.
O wash me more & more from my guilt
& cleanse me from my sin.*

They move on to describe the psalmist's plight, often using standard poetic images:

*My offences truly I know them;
my sin is always before me....*

*Make me hear rejoicing & gladness,
that the bones you have crushed may revive.*

They generally end with an expression of confidence in God & his saving help:

A humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn.

Praying the Psalms of Lament

The psalms of lament put us in the same situation for prayer as the psalms of praise. If we are in trouble, they can enable us to express our anguish, our cry to God. They give us words at times when words fail us. They can lift us out of the pit. But what if we are joyful, & don't feel like praying a lament? Again, as with the psalms of praise, we can pray the lament as part of the body of Christ, entering into the experience of someone who is in despair, someone whose experience the words of the psalm describe. It's one way we can "*weep with those who weep*" (Rom 12:15). In praying the laments we can pray with people throughout the world who are suffering for their faith, or suffering because of the injustice & greed of the rich & powerful.

Because our life & the life of the Church are constantly changing we bring something fresh to the psalms every time we pray them. Over the years certain psalms will become etched into our memory because they come to be associated with particular events in our lives. These psalms shed God's light on the events & when we come to the psalm again, we bring a memory of meaning which greatly enriches our prayer.

As we bring our lives & the life of the world to God in praying the psalms a rich store of memory builds up, particularly events being associated with particular Scriptures, & so the Prayer of the Church brings us into a place where our past, present & future become one in prayer before the Lord.