RESUMEN

"Los Salmos: Cómo la oración bíblica puede enriquecer nuestra vida de oración privada y litúrgica"— En el estudio reciente de los Salmos, los nuevos enfoques buscan explorar cómo estos entran en la vida contemporánea, el cuidado pastoral y la adoración. Este estudio se enfoca en el rico uso de los Salmos en la oración. Desde las tiempos más antiguos, los Salmos dieron forma a la vida de oración del pueblo de Dios, incluyendo a Jesús(Neh 12:8; Mt 27:46; Ef 5:19). Sin embargo, en gran parte de la práctica cristiana de hoy, estas oraciones se han descuidado. El propósito de este estudio es observar el papel que jugó la oración de los Salmos para ayudar al pueblo de Dios a recorrer su vida y crecer en su relación con Dios, y explorar cómo la práctica actual de orar los Salmos puede transformar nuestras oraciones comunitarias y personales y moldearnos en la fe de los salmistas.

Palabras clave: Salmos, oración, liturgia, adoración, experiencia religiosa

ABSTRACT

"Praying the Psalms: How Biblical Prayers Can Enrich Our Personal and Liturgical Prayer Lives"— In recent Psalms studies, new approaches seek to explore how the Psalms enter contemporary life, pastoral care, and worship. This study focuses on the rich use of the Psalms in prayer. From the earliest ages, the Psalms shaped the prayer life of God's people, including Jesus (Neh 12:8; Matt 27:46; Eph 5:19). Yet in much of Christian practice today, these prayers have become largely neglected. The purpose of this study is to look at the role the praying of the Psalms played in helping God's people traverse their life journey and grow in their relationship with God, and to explore how our praying the Psalms today can transform our communal and personal prayers, and shape us in the faith of the psalmists.

Keywords: Psalms, prayer, liturgy, worship, religious experience

PRAYING THE PSALMS: HOW BIBLICAL PRAYERS CAN ENRICH OUR PERSONAL AND LITURGICAL PRAYER LIVES

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Psalms as Prayers of God's People in History

The Psalms are prayers of the Bible *par excellence*. Uttered in praise, joy, sorrow, and despair, spoken or sung in privacy and in the public, by lay people, kings, poets, and priests, coming from both the righteous and the repentant sinners, the Psalms have served as both an essential guide to prayer and the prayer book to generations of believers. The universal characteristic of most of the Psalms reveals their intended use in diverse life situations and worship, and makes them relevant to people in all times. The psalmists often refer to their afflictions in broad terms: mourning, sickness, enemies, fear of death, accusers, grave, sackcloth, and others. Yet the precise nature of the problems is obscure. Similarly, the psalmists frequently express their praise and gratitude to God in general terms, without, for example, revealing the exact circumstances of deliverance. It is thus not surprising that believers of all times could, and can identify their experiences in the sentiments of the Psalms. Even the psalms, whose titles relate them to specific historical events, lack explicit details to determine the precise nature of the psalmists' afflictions or reasons for praise (e.g., Pss 51; 54). This seems not to be the case with some other prayers or psalms in the Bible (e.g., 1 Sam 1:10-11; 2 Sam 1:17-27).

In the ancient Israel, where the Psalms originated, the Psalms were used in public and private worship, and so it is correct to regard the Psalms as the hymnbook of the temple/synagogue and as Israel's prayer book (1 Chr 16:7, 9; Neh 12:8).[1] For example, the "Egyptian

[1]Many indications point to this direction. For example, King David, whose name appears in the superscription of most psalms in the present Psalter, was active in organizing the liturgy of Israel's worship (1 Chr 13-29). Numerous psalms were

Hallel" (Pss 113-118) and the "Great Hallel" (Ps 136), along with the pilgrimage songs (Pss 120-134), were sung at the three major annual festivals (Exod 23:14, 17; Lev 23), including the festivals of the New Moon and the dedication of the temple. The Egyptian Hallel received a significant place in the Passover ceremony. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung at the beginning of the Passover meal, and Pss 115-118 at the end (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26). The "Daily Hallel" (Pss 145-150) was incorporated into the daily prayers in the synagogue morning services.

In the NT, for example, Jesus sang some psalms at his Last Supper with his disciples (Matt 26:30), and prayed with the words of Ps 22 at the cross (Matt 27:46). Mary's praise to God is reminiscent of the psalmists' praise (Luke 1:46-55).[2] The Psalms found a significant place in the life of the first church (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; Jas 5:13). After the destruction of the second temple in AD 70, when the sacrificial ritual could no longer be observed, prayer and the Psalms came to enjoy a special status in Jewish public and private worship.

The Psalms continued to play an important role in the prayer life

attributed to the famous temple musicians: for example, Pss 50, 73-83 to Asaph (1 Chr 25:1, 2), Pss 42; 44-47; 49; 84-85, and 88 to the sons of Korah (1 Chr 6:31-38; 2 Chr 20:19), Ps 88 to Heman the Ezrahite (1Chr 25:5, 6), and Ps 89 to Ethan the Ezrahite (1 Chr 15:17, 19). Psalm 105:1-15 comprise the first part of the festal song (1 Chr 16:8-22) that David handed over to Asaph and his musicians at the setting down of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (1 Chr 16:7). The second part of David's festal hymn in 1 Chr 16:8-36 consists of Ps 96, and is closed by Ps 106:1, 47, 48. Some psalm titles link the Psalms with communal worship (e.g., "A Song at the dedication of the house of David," Ps 30; "A Song for the Sabbath day," Ps 92; "A Song of Ascents," Pss 120-134). The editorial note at the end of Ps 72 suggests that the Psalms were viewed as *prayers* (Heb. תְּפִלָּה) (Ps 72:20). Numerous psalms mention specific acts of worship in the sanctuary, especially prayer (e.g., Pss 5:2; 54:2; 55:1; 63:2, 3; 66:13, 14; 84:8; 86:6; 95:2; 118:25; 119:108; 143:1).

[2]The following are some of the common motives and phrases: "my heart greatly rejoices" (Ps 28:7; Luke 1:47), God remembers His servants in their lowly state (Ps 136:23; Luke 1:48), the Lord has done great things (Pss 71:19; 126:2-3; Luke 1:49), God's name is holy (Pss 103:1; 106:47; Luke 1:49), God's mercy extends to those who fear Him from generation to generation (Pss 103:17; 118:4; Luke 1:50), God's mighty arm (Pss 98:1; 136:12; Luke 1:51), God defeats the mighty ones (Ps 135:10; Luke 1:52), God fills the hungry with good things (Pss 107:9; 146:7; Luke 1:53), and has helped Israel in remembrance of His mercy (Pss 78; 98:3; 124; Luke 1:54).

of Christian communities in church history. The evolution of various practices in Christian liturgies in early centuries is a complex story, but it is beyond doubt that cycles of psalms have marked the liturgical life of most Christian traditions. There emerged two recurrent acts of Christian worship in which the Psalms had a large place: the Eucharistic liturgy, which commemorated Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, and the other was what became known as Divine Office, that is, the set prayers at various times through the period of twenty-four hours (e.g., Vigils at night time, Lauds at daybreak, Prime at the "first" hour, or roughly seven o' clock). The language of the Psalms has shaped the language and ethos of Christian prayers and liturgies. For example, the Greek phrase *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy) in the Eucharistic liturgy is an adaptation of a recurrent phrase in Septuagint Psalms (e.g., Ps 57:2).[3] The famous acclamation "Halleluiah" or "Alleluia" is also adopted from the Psalms (e.g., Pss 111:1; 112:1; 113:1).

By the fourth century there is evidence that, when the Psalms were used in liturgy, they were sung responsively: a cantor would sing successive parts of the psalm, to which the congregation would respond with a refrain. In his *Confessions*, Augustine remarks about the emotional effect of the Psalms on his spiritual life. Very early in church history certain Psalms were assigned for the readings/prayers on the important occasions of the church year—Christmas, Holy Week and Easter, and Pentecost. This practice was established in both western and eastern Christian churches.[4] By the seventh century, seven penitential psalms were selected to lead supplicants through confession of sin to forgiveness, and renewed commitment to God (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143).

There is a long tradition of praying the Psalms as part of personal or private devotion. In his *Letter to* Marcellinus, Athanasius (ca. 295-383), the bishop of Alexandria, tells of how various psalms can fit the spiritual need of a Christian.

[3]William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 166, 175-178.

[4]Ibid., 166-68, 179-184.

> The other psalms he recognizes as being his own words. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the song, as if they were his own songs… And it seems to me that these words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul, and this affected, he might recite them… And if you see your acquaintances turning against you, do not be alarmed, but turn your mind to the future and sing Psalm 30 [that is, Psalm 31].[5]

Martin Luther's lectures on the Psalms traced the path for the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Luther poignantly speaks of the Psalms as prayers.

> Where can one find nobler words to express joy than in the Psalms of praise and gratitude? In them you can see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at a lovely pleasure-garden, or were gazing into heaven… Or where can one find more profound, more penitent, more sorrowful words in which to express grief than in the Psalms of lamentations? In these, you can see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at death or gazing into hell, so dark and obscure is the scene rendered by the changing shadows of the wrath of God… It is therefore easy to understand why the Book of Psalms is the favourite book of all the saints. For every man on every occasion can find in it Psalms which fit his needs, which he feels to be as appropriate as if they had been set there just for his sake. In no other book can he find the words to equal them, nor better words. Nor does he wish. And follows from this a further excellence that when some such a word has come home and is felt to answer his need, he receives assurance that he is in the company of the saints, and that all that has happened to the saints is happening to him, because all of them join in singing a little song with him, since he can use their words to talk with God as they did. All this is reserved to faith, for an ungodly man has no idea what the words mean.[6]

[5]William A. Clebsch, "Preface," to Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 116, quoted in Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 165.

[6]Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 39-40.

When John Calvin was invited to superintend the Reformation in Geneva in 1537, he saw the Psalms as the remedy for the poor conduct of worship in that city:

> Furthermore it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God so that the hearts of all may be aroused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises and thanks to God with a common love… Certainly at present the prayers of the faithful are so cold that we should be greatly ashamed and confused. The psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of His name.[7]

The Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sought to restore the Psalms to the congregation by setting them to the well-known tunes of the day. In the eighteenth-century psalm paraphrases became increasingly acceptable, because they permitted greater beauty of musical expression. The book *The Bay Psalter* was the first published book in the New World, testimony to the importance of the Psalms in the lives of newcomers to America.[8]

Ellen G. White describes David's penitent psalms as the language of his soul and prayers which illustrate the nature of true sorrow for sin (Pss 31:1, 2; 51:1-14).[9] She encourages believers to memorize texts from the Psalms as the means of fostering the sense of God's presence in their lives, and highlights Jesus' practice of lifting his voice in the psalm when met with temptation and oppressive fear.[10] Ellen G. White also remarks, "The history of the songs of the Bible is full of suggestion as to the uses and benefits of music and song…

[7]John Calvin, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta*, ed. Peter Barth et al. (Munich, 1926-36), 1.369; translation in Garside, *Calvin's Theology of Music*, 7-8, quoted in Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 199.

[8]J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 177.

[9]Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1956), 24-25.

[10]Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), 166, 255.

It is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth. . . Indeed, many a song is prayer."[11]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a profound remark in regard to praying the historical psalms (e.g., Pss 78, 105, 106), which can be applied to praying all psalms.

> We pray these Psalms when we regard all that God does once for his people as done for us, when we confess our guilt and God's grace, when we hold God true to his promises on the basis of his former benefits and request their fulfillment, and when we finally see the entire history of God with his people fulfilled in Jesus Christ, through whom we have been helped and will be helped. For the sake of Jesus Christ we bring God thanksgiving, petition, and confession.[12]

With the rise of spiritual songs and other hymnody of the nineteenth and especially twentieth centuries, the congregational singing of the Psalms declined in many churches (although certain Christian traditions such as the Reformed tradition maintained the singing of the Psalms in worship). Fortunately, during the last several decades of the twentieth century, there has been a revival in the use of the Psalms in worship, as evidenced in practices of revising a number of Christian prayer books and hymnals to include wider selections of the Psalms.[13]

Church history abounds in remarkable examples of the use of the Psalms as prayers, which cannot be highlighted here, but these examples seem to suffice the purpose of demonstrating the Psalms' role as the backbone of prayer life of both Jewish and Christian traditions in history. Generations of believers in the past and present have experienced the Psalms as both God's Word to His people, which opens the treasury of His grace to them, and the word which God wants to hear from His people, which enables them to receive Him as their sovereign Lord and Savior.

[11]Ibid., 167-168.

[12]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 35.

[13]McCann, *The Book of Psalms*, 14-15, 177.

Unjustly Dismissed Borrowed Oil

Rolf Jacobson shares an astonishing anecdote from his friend's life. The story tells of a time when an old evangelist paid a visit to her home. As they were sitting down to eat dinner, her father began the meal with a prayer which consisted of reciting Ps 145:15, 16: "The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."[14] When he was in the midst of his prayer, the evangelist interrupted him: "We thank you God that we do not have to burn our lamps with borrowed oil." Jacobson rightly remarks that with this pejorative critique, the evangelist dismissed the irreplaceable value of prayer uses of the Psalms.[15]

A belief that only spontaneous, unlearned prayer is real prayer appears to be prevalent among some Christians. However, Jesus' disciples were immensely rewarded when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1-4). God placed a prayer book, Psalms, at the heart of the Bible not simply to inform us about how people of ancient times prayed but to teach us to pray today. With all due respect to spontaneous prayer, I am arguing here that our conventional, routine prayer lives can be offered new dimensions and power when the spiritual oil of the psalms is poured into our lamps. Here are some ways of how praying the Psalms can enrich, shape, and transform our individual and communal prayers.

Psalms as Dialogues with God

Prayer is commonly described as speaking to God or divine power. Yet biblical prayers are not pious monologues. The psalmists move beyond mere uttering of praises and revealing of their deepest thoughts and longings to a higher power by seeking to prompt a response from

[14]Unless it is noted otherwise, this and other biblical quotes are taken from the NKJV.

[15]Rolf Jacobson, "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil," in *Psalms and Practice: Worship, Virtue, and Authority*, ed. Stephen Breck Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 90.

the divine Listener. The psalmists often implore God to "give ear" (listen) (Pss 5:1; 17:1; 39:12; 54:2; 55:1), "hear my prayer" (Pss 39:12; 54:2; 84:8; 143:1), "look" (Pss 11:2; 25:18; 80:14; 84:9; 119:132; 142:4), "answer me" (Pss 27:7; 102:2; 143:1, 7), "come to me" (Pss 101:2; 119:77), "make haste to (help) me" (Pss 38:22; 40:13; 70:1, 5; 71:12; 141:1), and "deliver me" (Pss 6:4; 7:1; 22:20; 25:20; 31:1-2, 15). The Psalms thus seek to assume the dynamics of vivid dialogues or interactions with God. Prayers to Yahweh are meaningful because "the God of Israel is not some personified natural numen, but in reality of his person he is the Lord, the king, the creator, and the judge of all beings."[16] The Lord refers to Himself as "I" (Ps 81:10), and thus makes it possible to address Him as "You" (Ps 90:1).

For the psalmists, praying to God is meaningful because God is the sovereign Creator, in contrast to the lifeless pagan idols which are the products of human hands (Pss 96:5; 115; 135:14-21; 136:5). If there is no Creator who is actively involved with His creation, then prayer is just a monologue directed to an unresponsive space, and so ceases to be prayer. Biblical prayers spring from the experience of God's grace in creation and in the history of redemption, and are responses to God's revelation (Pss 34:4; 54:6-7; 135:1-13; 136:1-26). The Lord has revealed Himself to Israel as the living God who responds to those who call upon Him (Pss 55:22; 135; 136). Therefore, Israel continually calls upon the Lord (Pss 116:6; 118:5; 145:19), which implies a living and dynamic relationship between God and His people. As the Creator and Savior, God initiates and sustains the dialogue with His people. James L. Mays points out that surely the psalmists have "no empirical proof to offer to us that the universe is not empty, void of any answer to the travail of human experience," but they know what faith knows because they have already been addressed by a word, and venture to speak because they have already heard someone "speak." Prayer thus is a witness that "God is, that he can be addressed, that one speaks to him uninhibitedly of life's worst, that he hears and accepts."[17]

[16]Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 33.

[17]James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 57.

The notion of the Psalms as vital dialogues with God is particularly highlighted in many Psalms where God speaks or responds in the first person, or where the psalmists, speaking of God, suddenly switch from third to first person to convey the impression of God's addressing the people directly.[18] The remarkable beauty and appeal of the Psalms as prayers lie in the fact that the Psalms are concurrently the pious prayers of believers and God's inspired word. Praying the Psalms thus provides us with moments of intimacy with God when we experience what the apostle Paul describes in Rom 8:26-27:

> Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

The Psalms give us both the word which we utter to God and the word which God declares to us. We do not simply repeat the words of the Psalms, but we are impressed to assume the faith, devotion, and spiritual outlook of the psalmists, who uttered these prayers led by the Holy Spirit.

When we pray the Psalms, we stand in solidarity with generations of believers who have poured out their hearts before God with these inspired words and sought to be confirmed to God's Word, rather than expecting God to be confirmed to their words. The Psalms are "prayers of a cloud of witnesses"[19] (Heb 12:1). We witness that the words of the Psalms are true, and that we are committed to their values and expectations. Praying the Psalms brought together the people of Israel in one faith and one hope (Pss 106; 118; 122; 136) and likewise unites believers of all times as Jesus prayed (John 17).

[18]For example, Pss 2:6-9; 12:5; 35:3; 46:10; 50:5-23; 60:6-8; 68:22-23; 81:6-14; 82; 89:3-4, 19-37; 91:14-16; 95:8-11; 105:11; 132:11-12, 14-18.

[19]See note 3.

Psalms and the Paradox of Prayer

The paradoxical nature of the Psalms as prayers is demonstrated in the psalmists' responses to God's silence. In other words, the psalmists respond to God's absence as well as to God's presence. Enemies and sinful nature are often named as the main causes of distress,[20] but God's silence seems to be repeatedly portrayed as the source of the psalmists' most profound anguish. Worst of all is when God "hides His face" and refuses to acknowledge the prayers and offerings of His people (Pss 27:9; 30:7; 102:2). This is understood as a sign of God's absence (in contrast to Num 6:24-26), to which the individual and community respond with lament, confession, and humble petitions (Pss 13; 22; 30:7-10; 74; 89:38-52). The absence of God is felt like intense thirst in a dry, weary land (Pss 42:1, 2; 63:1) and as mortal anguish and agony (Pss 6:2, 3; 102:1-7). Yet, unlike some modern opinions, in the Psalms God's absence is not understood as God's nonexistence, but rather as God's disapproval and rejection of His people. The psalmists thus express their perplexity at God's silence by negative petitions for God not to hide (Pss 27:9; 55:1; 69:17), be silent (Pss 28:1; 39:12), forget (Pss 10:12; 74:19, 23), forsake (Pss 27:9; 38:21; 71:9, 18), rebuke (Pss 6:1; 38:1), delay (Pss 40:17; 70:5), and sleep (Ps 44:23), and positive petitions to awake (Pss 35:23; 44:23; 59:4, 5), arise (Pss 7:6; 9:19; 10:12), and listen (Pss 17:1, 6; 31:2; 39:12).

It is not only personal suffering that troubles the psalmists, but also, if not more, God's seeming lack of attention to His servants' suffering. The searching questions "Why"[21] or "How long?"[22] are both humble pleas and daring reminders to God to act. Prolonged periods of distress with no apparent help on the way are felt by the psalmists like God's unresponsiveness that provokes a sense of isolation and despair. The psalmists feel removed from God, and by extent also from their friends and family (Pss 42; 43; 88:8; 102:6-7). A variety of images portray physical, social, and spiritual seclusion in which the psalmist

[20]For example, Pss 17:13; 19:13; 25:7, 18; 42:10; 51:9; 55:3; 56:2; 64:2; 69:5; 71:4; 79:9; 82:4; 90:8; 94:3, 13.

[21]Pss 10:1; 22:1; 42:9; 43:2; 44:23; 74:1; 88:14.

[22]Pss 6:3; 13:1; 35:17; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13.

is entrapped. For example, the psalmist compares himself to lonely birds. "I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop" (Ps 102:6-7). The notion of wilderness highlights the sense of isolation. The image of a bird "alone on a housetop" suggests that the bird is outside of its nest, its resting place, and so is suffering. The psalmist cries to God "out of the depths" (Heb. מַעֲמַקִּים, "deep") as if being engulfed by mighty waters and "sinking into deep mire" where there is no foothold (Pss 69:2; 130:1). The images depict an oppressive situation from which there is no escape, except by divine intervention. Similar images of anguish are found in certain other psalms (Pss 18:16; 32:6; 46:3; 124:4-5; 144:7). J. Clinton McCann Jr. observes that "what is of paramount importance, however, is the psalmist's conviction that God is somehow present in the depths, or at least within earshot."[23]

It is remarkable that the psalmists resolve not to keep silent in the face of God's silence. Although they sometimes see God as a primary source of distress (Pss 39:10; 44:9; 60:3; 90:15), "for all their incomprehension, bewilderment and anger, the psalmists do not abandon God."[24] The psalmists know that God is still there, even when He is silent. He is still the same God whom they have heard in the past, and so they are confident that He hears their prayers (Pss 33:11; 48:14; 102:27; 105:8; 106:1). The fact that the psalmists persistently continue praying to God even when He is silent demonstrates their love for God and their awareness of God's love for them. They know that God will not remain silent forever. In many psalms we encounter "state in which hope despairs, and yet despair hopes at the same time; and all that lives is 'the groaning that can be uttered,' wherewith the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us, brooding over the waters shrouded in darkness."[25]

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[23]McCann, *The Book of Psalms*, 86.

[24]Phillip S. Johnston, "The Psalms and Distress," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Phillip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 74.

[25]Martin Luther, quoted in J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1898; repr. as *Commentary on the Psalms*, 2 vols. in 1, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 156, quoted in Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, 57.

From these honest responses to God, we can learn that "when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage."[26] The remarkable underlying assumption of the Psalms is that communication with God must go on regardless of life circumstances. Responses to God in the Psalms unswervingly uphold the potential efficacy of prayer because prayer is directed to the living God. Therefore, even God's silence is God's response, His "word," by which the psalmists were given a repentant heart (Ps 51), transformed to find greater faith (Pss 22, 77), strengthened in their commitment to God (Ps 13), and inspired to reconsider the greatness of God's wisdom and their own folly (Ps 73). When we pray the Psalms, we assume the persistence, boldness, courage, and hope of the psalmists. They guide us like a spiritual coach, encouraging us to continue on our spiritual journey, and comforting us that we are not alone, because other people like us walked the dark (and peaceful) paths ahead of us and were triumphant by the grace of God who heard them.

Although God's silence in the Psalms is mostly the cause of perplexity and lament, sometimes it is welcomed as the prelude to God's presence. "For God alone my soul waits in silence" (Ps 62:1, 5, RSV). "I have calmed and quieted my soul" (Ps 131:2). The Psalms thus teach us to embrace God's silence with reverence and peace, and make it the silence of faith and hope-filled waiting. Praying the Psalms thus helps us embrace the paradoxical nature of prayer, in which we experience God as both near and far, present and hidden. In Ps 62 the psalmist prays to God who is silent (vv. 1, 5), and remembers God who has spoken (v. 11). Yet the truth that God is his refuge and mighty rock never changes, and he trusts God at all times (vv. 7-8).

Biblical faith often implies uncertainty and suspense as much as confidence and assertion. Sometimes uncertainty and suspense come from the vast difference between God, who is the sovereign Creator (Pss 96:5; 115:15), and human beings, who are mortal creatures (Pss 78:39; 102:11; 144:4). God knows every human movement and

[26]Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007), 14.

thought (Ps 139), but God's thoughts are inconceivable to people (Pss 40:5; 92:5; 139:17). Yet, uncertainty is never about God, His loving and righteous character and trustworthiness. The psalmists may be uncertain about the future, but appeal nevertheless to God's unfailing love and faithfulness (Pss 36:5; 89:2; 136). Prayer is thus commitment that we make in love, trust, and hope.

Praying the Psalms Articulates Our Experience

It is remarkable how selectively the Psalms are used in some liturgies. Psalms that exalt God's power and splendor (hymns) or praise God for His marvelous deeds and salvation (thanksgiving psalms) can be heard from the pulpits far more often than other psalms, mostly psalms with complaints and laments, which seem to be banned from many liturgies. The words of Ps 137:8, 9 just do not seem right to most people: "O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, Happy the one who repays you as you have served us! Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock!" Many would argue that Ps 44 does not fit a worship service: "Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way; But You have severely broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death" (vv. 18, 19). Thus the selectiveness of Psalms in liturgy reflects the exclusiveness of moods and words that we express in our communal prayers.

Sometimes contemporary worship services featuring popular genre of praise music attempt to create "a sense of 'false happiness' as the main purpose and normal state of the Christian Church and of individual Christian lives."[27] This could cause us to miss the point of worship. Such restrictiveness may be a sign of our inability or uneasiness to engage the dark realities of life in worship. Walter Brueggemann rightly observes that "surface use of the Psalms coincides with the denial of the discontinuities in our own experience."[28] This is true

[27]Beth LaNeel Tanner, "How Long, O Lord! Will Your People Suffer in Silence Forever?" in *Psalms and Practice*, 144.

[28]Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 8.

not only of the selective use of the Psalms but also of prayer. Though we may sometimes feel that God treats us unfairly when suffering hits us, we do not find it appropriate to express our thoughts in liturgy or even in private prayer. The failure to express honestly and openly our feelings and views before God in prayer often leaves us in bondage to our own emotions and sin. This also denies us confidence and trust in approaching God. Praying the Psalms gives an assurance that "when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny the deepness of our own human pilgrimage."[29] Psalm 44, for example, can help worshipers articulate their experience of innocent suffering freely and adequately. Praying the Psalms helps people experience the freedom of speech in prayer. The Psalms give us words that we cannot find or do not dare to speak.

Similarly, the psalms of praise and thanksgiving help believers to powerfully express their praise and thanks to God, and affirm their trust in Him. One can hardly find more vibrant and beautiful words of praise than those of Pss 93, 96-100, 105, 113, 126, 148, and 150. Praying these psalms enables believers to abide with greater focus in the praise to God. When their praise resonates with the psalms of praise, the people are prompted to meaningfully dwell on their own reasons for thanksgiving and to reflect on the meaning of praise in the context of the universal worship of God as the King of the whole creation. The Psalms are inspired prayers which, as Bonhoeffer says, determine our prayers by the richness of the Word of God, not the poverty of our heart, and transform us into the image of Christ, who stands in our place and prays for us.[30]

Praying the Psalms Supervises Our Experience

Praying the Psalms does more than enable worshippers to freely articulate their experience. Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller suggest that the Psalms supervise the experience according to God's standards that make it bearable, manageable, and, hopefully, meaningful

[29]Ibid., 14.

[30]Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 15, 20-21.

in the community. The Psalms make our experience "formful just when it appeared to be formless and therefore deathly and destructive."[31]

Praying the Psalms will sometimes reveal a dissonance that may exist between the emotions of the Psalms and the emotions of the worshiper. Imagine a worshiper who learns that he is dying of cancer. The lamenting words of Ps 22:1 will help him express his grief and sense of loneliness: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?" However, he will also read in the same psalm, "I will declare Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (v. 22). The latter words may not coincide with his present experience, and they may even drive him to despair. Jacobson argues that pastors and theologians must learn to make fruitful use of this dissonance and help the worshiper resolve the spiritual discomfort by letting the Psalms introduce new cognitions, experiences, and attitudes to him.[32] By giving us words to pray, the Psalms teach us that we pray first and later that we feel what we pray.[33]

When my husband and I lost our first child due to some complications at delivery, I was left without any spiritual oil in my reservoir. As I was lying alone in my room that Friday evening, I reached for my Bible to begin the Sabbath. I could not pray. I had no words to say. The Bible opened at the place where the marker was placed the day before. This was Isa 49, that is, the song of Restoration of Zion. I began reading mechanically. It seemed as if each word of the song was meant to pierce my heart: "Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth! And break out in singing, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, and will have mercy on His afflicted" (v. 13). But when I read v. 14, I felt that my lost words came back to me, and I read over and over again: "But Zion said: 'The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me.'" These words became *my* words. They expressed

[31]Walter Brueggemann and Patrick D. Miller, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 86.

[32]Jacobson, "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil," 92-93.

[33]Ari L. Goldman, *Being Jewish: The Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 209.

everything that was in my heart. These were the only words spoken by Zion in the song. The Lord continues the song by answering Zion: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (v. 15, NIV). I felt then that God was talking to me. I was still sad and desperate, but not forsaken and forgotten anymore.

One of my students copied Ps 42 on a beautifully decorated scroll and sent it to me in the hospital. "My tears have been my food day and night… Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (vv. 3, 5). These words filled me with hope—that tears would be exchanged for praise one day in the future. Isaiah 49 and Ps 42 became my prayers at the time when I had no words of my own. Over the days and weeks, I began to feel and really mean the praise and hope expressed in these two songs. I still pray them when I wish to express special thanks to God.

Praying the Psalms supervises our experience by taking the worshiper to new spiritual horizons. The Psalms let worshipers express their feelings and understanding, but they are not left psychologically or spiritually where they presently are. The worshipers are led to abandon their burdens of pain, disappointment, hatred, anger, and despair before God and to adopt a new understanding and eventually healing. The movement from lament to praise observed in most psalms of lament is typical of the psalm genre, but it is also suggestive of the spiritual transformation that the believers experience when they receives divine grace and comfort in prayer (Pss 13, 22, 77).[34]

In the same way, praying the Psalms provides a joyful, grateful heart with inspired ways to experience new dimensions of praise and thanksgiving. The Psalms can lead worshipers to relate, for example, their experience of God's deliverance to other aspects of their faith in God. People who pray with Ps 28 to express their praise to God for answering their prayers (vv. 6-8) are led to relate God's present deliv-

[34]Brueggemann describes this movement in our lives of faith with God in terms of (1) being securely oriented, (2) being painfully disoriented, and (3) being surprisingly reoriented. Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 1-15.

erance to God's judgment of the wicked and His deliverance of the whole people of God in the future (vv. 1-5, 9). In this way, the praying of Ps 28 guides worshippers to look beyond their personal interests, and seek the deliverance of the whole people of God and cessation of all evil in the world.

Praying the Psalms Transforms Our Experience

Praying the Psalms transformed Israel's faith because it made God's people to repeatedly redefine themselves and their relationship with God to conform to God's revelation and will. They had to replace false hope and a false interpretation of events with the truth of God. They had to face their denial of how bad the reality was, denial of their own culpability for their situation, and denial of their anger and distrust they felt toward God whom they often held responsible for their misfortunes. Praying the Psalms helped the Israelites come to a new understanding and entailed several shifts in their thinking and believing.[35] For example, Ps 50 admonishes the people to serve God with true devotion and purity of heart and actions, reminding them that their sacrifices to God are meaningless without these qualities. Psalms 78, 81, and 89 correct the people's tendency to create false hopes by highlighting only God's faithfulness to His covenant and neglecting their own obedient response of faith to Him.

Tremper Longman rightly says that "when we read the Psalms with faith, we come away changed and not simply informed."[36] The language of the Psalms is creative and transformative. Praying the Psalms does not always pronounce what is, but rather "evokes into being what does not exist until it has been spoken."[37] In other words, the Psalms are not simply ancient human words that help the believers express their inner feelings before God. The Psalms are the Word of God by which the be-

[35]Kathleen Harmon, "The Role of the Psalms in Shaping Faith Part 2: How Praying the Psalms Transformed Israel's Faith," *Liturgical Ministry* 15 (Winter 2006): 58.

[36]Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 13.

[37]Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 18.

liever is transformed into, for example, a person with a broken and contrite heart as described in Ps 51. The constitutive power of the Psalms in relation to piety is demonstrated in the ability of a particular psalm to enable the believer through the Holy Spirit to act in the way demanded by that psalm. In other words, "the praying of the psalm is an event by which God's grace is made manifest in the lives of believers."[38]

God's grace is made manifest because we pray the Psalms in the name of Jesus. This means that we allow God's Word to shape us according to God's will and unite us with Christ, who demonstrated God's will perfectly and prayed the Psalms as the incarnate Son of God. Bonhoeffer ponders on the profound unity between the believers and Christ, their intercessor:

> It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than us. Therefore it is the prayer of the human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.[39]

When we pray the Psalms, we seek to find Christ who is revealed in the Psalms,[40] and we understand their message in the light of God's revelation in Christ. This approach can help us adopt certain difficult psalms, such as the psalms with imprecations (e.g., Ps 109), and pray them as divine-human protests against evil and in the light of God's grace and judgment in Christ.

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[38]Harry P. Nasuti, "The Sacramental Function of the Psalms in Contemporary Scholarship and Liturgical Practice," in *Psalms and Practice*, 83.

[39]Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 20-21.

[40]Jesus pointed to the Psalms as inspired resources about his person and ministry (Luke 24:44). The Psalms are quoted extensively in the NT in relation to Christ (e.g., Christ's sonship, Ps 2:7 in Matt 3:17; Heb 1:5; obedience, Ps 40:6-8 in Heb 10:5-7; suffering, Ps 69:4 in John 15:25; resurrection, Pss 2:7; 16:10 in Acts 2:25-28; 13:33-35; priesthood, Ps 110:4 in Heb 5:6; and kingship, Pss 2:6; 89:18-19 in Acts 5:31).

A mere repetition of the words of the Psalms with only a slight comprehension of their meaning may not produce the authentic transformation intended by their use. Thus, believers need to carefully and methodically study the Psalms and seek a profound understanding of them. Praying the Psalms is not meant to serve as a kind of use of amulets with quotations from the Hebrew Psalter which are believed to have some kind of magical curing power.[41] Mays observes that the words of the Psalms may become empty and perverted if they are spoken without an understanding of the distinctive faith of the Psalms. One must, by means of the Psalms, enter and live in that particular world of faith if prayer with their words is to be authentic.[42] Praying the Psalms enables the believers not only to understand but also to inhabit and celebrate the biblical worldview in which, contrary to most modern assumptions, God's time and ours overlap and intersect, God's space and ours overlap and interlock, and the sheer material world of God's creation is flooded with God's love and glory.[43]

Praying the Psalms Broadens Our Experience

Sometimes there may be a total disjunction between the words of a psalm and the worshiper's present experience. Imagine a happy newly wedded couple praying Ps 88: "Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave" (vv. 2, 3). However, Jacobson shares two reasons why praying a lament psalm is beneficial to the worshippers who are not in distress. First, it prepares them for the time of trouble that may come in the future. Contrary to the popular gospel of prosperity, the Psalms make the worshipers aware that suffering is part of general human experience and happens to the righteous, not only to the wicked. The Psalms give the assurance that God is in control and provides strength and solution in time of troubles.

[41]Eli Davis, "The Psalms in Hebrew Medical Amulets," *VT* 42, no. 2 (1992): 174.

[42]Mays, *The Lord Reigns*, 6.

[43]N. T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They are Essential* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 22.

Second, praying the lament psalms teaches the worshipers compassion towards those who are suffering. We must be mindful of the less fortunate and fellow believers who are persecuted for their faith when expressing our happiness and gratitude to God. In the same way, introducing a psalm of praise to sufferers can transform their suffering by creating hope.[44]

The Psalms broaden our experience by showing that individual prayers are part of the universal worship of God, and so inspire us to look beyond our personal circumstances and to assume a much broader, historical, and universal perspective in life. For example, Ps 139 helps us to see our lives as part of the history of God's people and to claim that past as our own. Psalms 148 and 150 transform us into members of a universal choir which, even now, praises God unceasingly. Even praying Ps 88, the psalm which confesses probably the most dejected sentiments in the Psalter, can provide us with a sense of belonging and comfort in times of distress because it connects us with generations of worshipers, including Jesus, who prayed this psalm.

The Psalms often supply fresh reasons for prayer that we did not consider before or have neglected. For example, Ps 122 instructs us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (v. 6). Jerusalem has been a place of conflict for over three thousand years, and its continual struggle for peace has become a symbol of the world's cry for peace and prosperity. This and other psalms prompt us to be mindful of and pray for people outside of our immediate community and for the needs of the suffering world.

Praying the Psalms makes the believing community aware of the full range of human experience and teaches the worshippers to engage the various facets of that experience and worship. The responsibility of pastors and church leaders includes leading in that process and keeping the lamps of the congregation burning constantly with good oil. The Psalms are abundant with precious spiritual oil. The Psalms are divine-human prayers. For that reason, praying the Psalms brings the believing community at the center of God's will and powerful healing grace.

[44]Jacobson, "Burning Our Lamps with Borrowed Oil," 94-97.

Fostering the Use of the Psalms in Private and Public Worship

Regular and intentional use of the Psalms through praying and singing in private and public worship contributes to spiritual vitality and profound understanding of how God deals with the world. Here are some ways of how to foster the use of the Psalms in private and public prayer.[45]

A simple way of introducing the Psalms into daily prayer life is to devote time each day (or each Sabbath for the communal worship) to reading of a psalm, beginning with Ps 1 and following the order given in the Psalter. Another way is following some traditional readings that attribute certain psalms to specific days. For example, according to Jewish tradition, daily psalms that were sung by the Levitical choir in the temple are Pss 48 (Monday), 82 (Tuesday), 94 (Wednesday), 81 (Thursday), 93 (Friday), and 92 (Sabbath). Each psalm, except for Pss 81 and 82, bears the appropriate daily designation in its heading in the Septuagint (the LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Some traditional ways of reading the Psalms are reflected in some psalm superscriptions, like in the title of Ps 92, "a Song for the Sabbath day." Ellen G. White advised the believers to read Ps 105 "at least once every week."[46] As was mentioned in the first section of this study, specific Psalms were recognized as particularly suitable for certain occasions in the life of some Christian communities (e.g. Christmas, Easter). Psalm 51 can lead the worshippers through confession of sin to forgiveness before the communion service (also, for example, Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143).

Another way of introducing the Psalms into daily prayer life is to follow the psalm genre classifications, and pray mainly those psalms that correspond to our current situation:

[45]For some other helpful insights on how to cultivate a culture of praying the Psalms, see, e.g., C. Richard Wells, "Reclaiming the Psalms in Pastoral Prayer: A True Story", in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, ed. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 109-124.

[46]Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 98, 99.

(1) psalms of lament (crying to God in my need) (e.g., Pss 3-7, 9, 10, 13, 17, 25-28, 54-57, 120, 139-143);
(2) psalms of lament for community (crying to God in times of communal distress) (e.g., Pss 12, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, and 126);
(3) thanksgiving psalms (thanking God for His blessings in our lives) (e.g., Pss 30, 32, 107, 116, 124, and 138), hymns (praising God for His power and majesty) (e.g., Pss 8, 29, 33, 46-48, 65, 95-100, 117, 122, 134-136, and 145-150), penitential psalms (crying out to God for forgiveness of sins) (Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143), wisdom psalms (pondering at the greatness of God's ways) (e.g., Pss 1, 37, 112, and 119), Christological psalms (coming near to Jesus Christ) (e.g., Pss 2, 22, 72, 102, 110, and 118), Torah psalms (magnifying God for His Word) (e.g., Pss 1, 19, and 119), historical psalms (learning from the past) (e.g., Pss 78, 105, and 106), and pilgrimage psalms (longing for heavenly Zion) (e.g. Pss 120-134).

One of the ways to pray psalms is to first read the psalm deliberately, engaging in simple rumination, and then pray with the words of the psalm, appropriating the faith of the psalm and confessing it along with our personal supplication and sentiments. Meditating upon the psalm involves reflection on the various aspects of the psalm: the way the psalmist addresses God, the way the psalmist describes himself and his life circumstances, the reasons for prayer, and similar. Consider in which ways your situation corresponds to the psalmist's experience, and how praying the psalm helps you articulate your experience. Examine how praying the psalm can transform your experience by introducing new, biblical thoughts and possibilities to your spiritual life. Ask if the psalm broadens your horizons by guiding you to assume a more universal, divinely-oriented perspective in prayer. If something in the psalm challenges you, ponder, for example, whether the psalm corrects your present false hopes or views about God and life. Contemplate the psalm's message in the light of Christ's person and salvific work. Look for the new motives for prayer that the psalm supplies, and think about their importance

for you, your community of faith, and the world. Remember the people who will positively respond to and benefit from the psalm, and consider sharing the psalm with them.

After musing over the psalm, pray the psalm as your own prayer, asking God to impress His word upon your heart and mind. Pray the psalm in the name of Jesus, by seeking his intercession and understanding of his character and salvation. Furnishing personal details while praying the psalm often enriches the prayer. Some people find writing their prayers and reflections on the Psalms in a form of journal beneficial. Praying the Psalms has helped many believers establish and maintain regular and fulfilling prayer lives. They will agree readily that "it is pure grace, that God tells us how we can speak with him and have fellowship with him."[47]

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[47]Bonhoeffer, *Psalms*, 15.