

Psalms – Communicating with God through the good and bad

27 August 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Today we are thinking about the songs that we sing in church ... including from the Psalms, which for Christians is perhaps the most popular book in the OT part of our Bibles.

Both of the songs we sang just before were taken from verses in particular psalms – from Psalm 148, a song of praise, and from Psalm 22, a lament.

Both these songs were written in the last 50 years.

But the practice of singing whole psalms in church has largely disappeared, unless you are in a Presbyterian church. Yet the first 100 or so hymns in *Together in Song* are all psalms. And for the first **1700 years** or so of the church, psalms were by far the most common songs sung.

So what's happened? Why have we fallen out of favour with singing Psalms?

And what have we done to psalms like Psalm 22 that we're about to read now, which is often associated with the passion and suffering of Jesus on the cross, and yet which inspired the catchy song *In the presence of your people* ...

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 22:1-26

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

**Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?**

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;
you are the one Israel praises.

**In you our ancestors put their trust;
they trusted and you delivered them. ...**

But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

'He trusts in the Lord,' they say,
'let the Lord rescue him.'

**Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.' ...**

Dogs surround me,
a pack of villains encircles me;
they pierce my hands and my feet.

All my bones are on display;
people stare and gloat over me.

**They divide my clothes among them
and cast lots for my garment. ...**

But you, Lord, do not be far from me.

You are my strength; come quickly to help me.

I will declare your name to my people;

in the assembly I will praise you.

You who fear the Lord, praise him!

All you descendants of Jacob, honour him!

Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!

From you comes my praise in the great assembly;

before those who fear you I will fulfil my vows.

The poor will eat and be satisfied;

those who seek the Lord will praise him –

may your hearts live for ever!

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'

And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

Then he said to them, 'But who do **you** say that I am?'

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

TiS 727 In the presence of your people

In the presence of your people

I will praise your name,

for alone you are holy,

enthroned on the praises of Israel.

Let us celebrate your goodness

and your steadfast love;

may your name be exalted

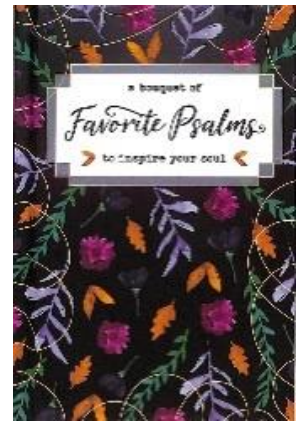
here on earth and in heaven above.

MESSAGE Psalms – Communicating with God through the good and bad

Today we're thinking about **Psalms** – that book in the Bible that tends to open up if you open up your Bible roughly half way through.

The most well-known psalm – often sung at funerals – is of course ...

Psalm 23, The Lord's my shepherd.

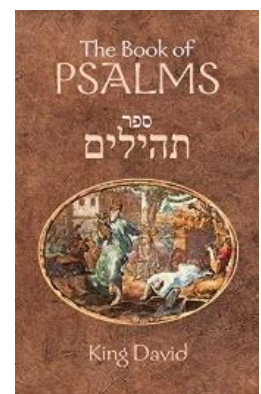


Other favourite psalms ... and why are these your favourites?

What are the psalms?

Are they prayers? Are they songs?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the book we know in English as Psalms is called **Tehilim**, the book of praises. Quite a few of the titles mention musical instruments or other musical type.



When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek the book became **Psalmoi**, literally songs played on a harp. So immediately we learn that this collection of prayers were intended to be sung – and sung to musical accompaniment. Singing the psalms was – and remains today - a central feature of Jewish worship. Given that many of the early Christians were Jews, it's not surprising then that the psalms were sung as a key part of **Christian** worship from the very beginning – along with reading Scripture and celebrating Communion.

Psalms were the main songs used for Christian worship – along with some hymns about Jesus and the creeds - up until the 18th century when other 'uninspired' songs became fashionable. While we may regard these more modern hymns and songs to be inspiring for our worship, they were termed 'uninspired' because they did not come word for word from the Scriptures, like the Psalms.

Of the 150 psalms in our Bible, nearly half are attributed to David, with other collections attributed to priests like Asaph or groups like the sons of Korah. Some are songs of praise, some are songs of thanksgiving or trust, some are based on wisdom writing, some are enthronement songs celebrating Yahweh as King and some were designated songs of Ascent to be sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem. This chart includes another category – imprecatory psalms – that basically ask God to judge or harm one’s enemies.

Book	WISDOM / DIDACTIC PSALMS	MESSIANIC / ROYAL PSALMS	PSALMS OF LAMENT	IMPRECATORY PSALMS	PRAISE / THANKSGIVING	PILGRIMAGE PSALMS
I	1, 19, 37	2, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22 23, 29, 34, 35, 38	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 1 213, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 32, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41	4, 11, 16, 23, 26, 27, 32, 35	8, 19, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 40	15, 24, 26
II	49	45, 47, 72	42, 43, 44, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71	55, 59, 62, 63, 69	65, 66, 67	46, 48, 50, 68
III	73	78, 80, 89	74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 88	79, 83, 88	75	76, 78, 81, 82, 84, 87
IV		93, 95, 96, 97 98, 99, 101	90, 94, 102	91	92, 100, 103, 104	105, 106
V	112, 119, 127, 128, 133	109, 110, 118, 132, 144	108, 109, 120, 123 126, 129, 130, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143	109, 120, 121 130, 131	107, 111, 113, 114 116, 117, 118, 124 138, 145-150	115, 120 -136

As you can see the most common type of psalm – about 65 in total - is actually the lament psalm – or complaint psalm - as an individual or the community cry out to God for help in times of distress or question God’s apparent distance and silence.

As you might expect, these psalms rarely feature in contemporary Christian songs. The emotions expressed in these psalms go against our expectation of a normal Christian life. They focus instead on grief, anger, fear, despair, isolation, loneliness, pain and anguish. And they are brutally honest. So a question for us is dare we be so honest in sharing with God how we are feeling?

Psalm 22 that we read earlier is one of the lament psalms, and is attributed to King David. It begins with the anguished cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, a cry we associate with Jesus hanging on the cross.

But this was also David’s experience of feeling abandoned and surrounded by enemies who mock and threaten his life, perhaps when he is forced to flee Jerusalem because his son

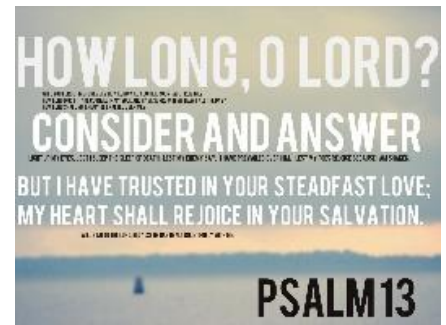
Absalom has staged a coup. In order to deal with the mocking and suffering he is undergoing, David seeks God’s help and promises to praise God’s name when the community gathers for worship.

Did you notice the shift in tone during the psalm, from a feeling of aloneness and distress to a feeling of trust and praise? Both movements are heartfelt.



But the song we sang earlier, *In the presence of your people*, is based on just two isolated verses from the psalm and seems to miss the point of the psalm. Yes Yahweh is enthroned on the praises of Israel which is what makes it so hard to live through suffering and rejection like David has. Where is Yahweh in his time of desperate need?

This same shift from complaint to trust occurs in another lament psalm, Psalm 13, also a psalm of David, which begins like this ...



*How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death. ...*

Psalm 13:1-4

Like in other lament psalms, there is then an implied pause – whether waiting for a response from God or a change in circumstances – before continuing and finishing with an affirmation of faith.

So Ps 13 finishes like this ...

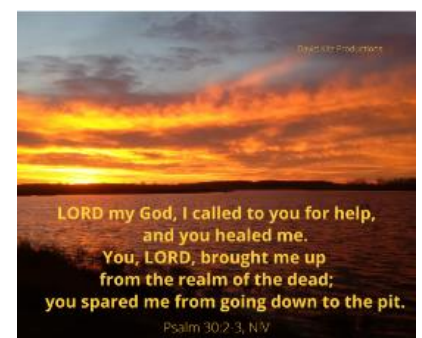
*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.*

Psalm 13:5-6

In this case, David remembers God's love and goodness.

In other lament psalms, God's protection or deliverance is praised.

Some psalms make trust and thanksgiving their central theme. So Psalm 30, another psalm of David, begins like this, perhaps remembering an occasion when David recovered from a serious illness.



*I will exalt you, Lord,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
Lord my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.* *Psalm 30:1-3*

Many psalms are quite raw in their emotion and what they ask of God.

These are the imprecatory psalms that ask directly for God to harm or smite enemies.

So take Psalm 137 for instance, a psalm from the exile, that has been set to a few contemporary tunes ...



*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill. ... Psalm 137:1-5*

But the closing verses of this psalm go like this:

*God, remember those Edomites,
and remember the ruin of Jerusalem.
that day they yelled out,
'Wreck it, smash it to bits!'
And you Babylonians – ravagers!
A reward to whoever gets back at you
for all you've done to us;
yes, a reward to the one who grabs your babies
and smashes their heads on the rocks!*
Psalm 137:7-9

This raw and impassioned cry features in several psalms, which is perhaps why we ignore these psalms or edit out the verses that offend our sensibilities.

The language doesn't sit well with our desire for worship to be about security and stability and peace, and advice for how to enjoy a good life.

These sentiments about seeking peace and a good quiet life are actually much more at home in the book of Proverbs, which offers plenty of advice of how to live such a peaceful and well-ordered life, along with our favoured psalms that tap into this longing for peace, such as Psalm 23 (The Lord's my shepherd) or Psalm 121 (I lift my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?).

According to OT scholar Walter Brueggemann, this seeking after a well settled life where most things make sense and God reigns somewhere in a far off heaven is a symptom of a middle-class church. He argues that such an attitude doesn't produce great prayer or powerful songs. Life is comfortable and we sing songs of praise.

But the majority of psalms are much more edgy, describing life as precarious and disturbing – filled with threat and anguish and suffering – whether from enemies attacking Israel or from verbal attacks from so-called friends or from sickness. These psalms cry out to God to intervene. Their language is honest and passionate, dangerous and far from polite. Life and faith are on the line.



Praying or singing these psalms feels somewhat alien to us because if we have troubles we can go to a hospital to seek treatment, or rely on our police and army to keep us safe. Perhaps our prayers would be more urgent if we lived in a war zone like Ukraine - O God, keep us safe from bombs and missiles tonight! Or if our child or grandchild was only just clinging to life, as has been the experience of our next door neighbour whose newborn spent most of her first two weeks of life in ICU with a twisted and blocked intestine.

The psalm writers cry out for God to bring order out of such chaos. They call on God by name and expect a response. The response is often left assumed - a gift of grace, a gift of faith that even in the heart of the storms of life, God is there to provide hope and a different perspective, which leads to praise and thanksgiving. New life is possible when all seems dark. God is faithful.

This hope is also expressed in words in the psalms – cries of great exaltation and praise and thanks.

Brueggemann concludes that the Psalter – the book of praise – is not for those whose life is comfortable and stable. Rather, the psalms invite us into the depth and passions of our own human pilgrimage.

We can dare to share our heartaches and pain and fears with God, trusting in God's love and faithfulness.

Finally, a few words about our Gospel reading and Peter's confession about Jesus.

One commentator with a sense of humour paraphrased the incident like this:

Jesus asked the disciples one day, 'Who do you say I am?'



They answered, 'The crowds think you act and talk like a prophet but we know better.
You are the Messiah,
the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being,
the kerygma in which we find meaning for our lives.'
And Jesus said, 'What?! Faith doesn't have to be that hard.
Life doesn't have to be that difficult.'



Sometimes, we just have to give voice to what we believe,
despite our doubts, like Peter.
And then we have to live out the implications of our faith,
which involves trusting, acting boldly and worshipping our God!

And so it's time to sing again, this time a song based on a single verse from Psalm 46. In this psalm
the nations are in uproar, kingdoms totter, mountains tremble with earthquakes, the seas roar and
foam, but God is with us to protect us and be a refuge.

Sometimes in the midst of storms in life this is all we can hold onto.

After this song we'll move straight into our prayers for others.

SONG ATOK 311 Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am God,
and there is none beside me.
Be still and know that I am God,
and there is none beside me.

I am the one whose love never fails,
and there is none beside me.

I am the one whose love never fails,
and there is none beside me.

I am the one who says 'Follow me',
and there is none beside me.

I am the one who says 'Follow me',
and there is none beside me.

Words and music John L. Bell © 1988 The Iona Community.