

Learning the Language of Prayer: Praying through the Psalms

“Therefore the most blessed Spirit of God the Father of orphans, the teacher of infants, seeing that we know not what or how we ought to pray, as the Apostle saith, and desiring to help our infirmities, after the manner of schoolmasters who compose for children letters and short prayers, that they may send them to their parents, so prepares for us (in) the book (of the Psalter) both the words and feelings with which we should address our heavenly Father.” ~ Martin Luther

“The marvel with the Psalter is that... the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up;...everyone is bound to find his very self in them and, be he faithful soul or be he sinner, each reads in them descriptions of himself.” ~ St. Athanasius

Purpose of the Class: (1) To get us to look at prayer in a new way, not as a list of petitions spoken Godward, but as a conversation – a communication with God in which we listen to Him, through His Word, and answer Him; and (2) to become students in the school of prayer, learning the inspired language of the Psalms. The point is not to read a book together, but to pray God’s Word together and to let His Word so change our prayer lives that we become psalm writers ourselves.

Assignment: Each week we will read and discuss one or two chapters of Eugene Peterson’s book, *Answering God*. Then, we will put into practice what we have learned as we pray through a series of Psalms together. During the week, everyone is encouraged to pray through one psalm each day of the week on days that we don’t meet (weekends off!).

Class Schedule:

Class I (March 9) – What is Prayer? What are the Psalms?; Psalms 1-7

Two week assignment: read the Introduction and Chapter 1;
Pray through Psalms 8-16

Class II (March 23) – Text; Psalms 17-19

Week assignment: read Chapters 2 & 3; Pray through Psalms 20-23

Class III (March 30) -- Way and Language; Psalms 24-28

Week assignment: read Chapter 4; Pray through Psalms 29-32

Class IV (April 6) – Story; Psalms 33-35

Week assignment: read Chapters 5 & 6; Pray through Psalms 36-39

Class V (April 13) – Rhythm and Metaphor; Psalms 40-43

Two week assignment: read Chapter 7; Pray through Psalms 44-52

Class VI (April 27) – Liturgy; Psalms 53-57

Week assignment: read Chapter 8; Pray through Psalms 58-61

Class VII (May 4) -- Praying for Enemies; Psalms 62-66

Week assignment: read Chapters 9 & 10; Pray through Psalms 67-70

Class VIII (May 11) -- Memory and Sharing Day; Psalms 71-72

Some Suggestions for Praying the Psalms in a Group:

- 1) Read each Psalm out loud, slowly and deliberately. We will divide up the readings into stanzas so that as many people as possible get a chance to read as well as pray.
- 2) Pause at the end of stanzas to allow everyone who is moved to pray the chance to do so. (This is good practice for congregational prayer times!)
- 3) Don't read the *selahs*. These are musical terms.
- 4) We won't be sharing prayer needs up front. Rather, we will let the text of the Psalm and the Holy Spirit guide the content of our prayers. (At first this seems strange, but you will find that the Holy Spirit knows our deepest needs already!)
- 5) Everyone is encouraged to pray. God values each of our voices and gives each of us something to share – be it short or long – with one another. We pray in community because God blesses the whole community through each individual member. If you don't share, our praying community will be impoverished!

A Method for Praying the Psalms During Your Quiet Time:

Read the Psalms, regularly, one at time, in order, slowly and deliberately, letting the text determine the nature and substance of your prayers. If you find that you are distracted while praying, try reading them out loud.

Schedule for Praying the Psalms in One Month:

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Day 1 Psalms 1-8 | Day 11 Psalms 56-61 | Day 21 Psalms 105-106 |
| Day 2 Psalms 9-14 | Day 12 Psalms 62-67 | Day 22 Psalms 107-111 |
| Day 3 Psalms 15-18 | Day 13 Psalms 68-70 | Day 23 Psalms 112-118 |
| Day 4 Psalms 19-23 | Day 14 Psalms 71-74 | Day 24 Psalms 119:1-105 |
| Day 5 Psalms 24-29 | Day 15 Psalms 75-78 | Day 25 Psalms 119:106-Psalm 122 |
| Day 6 Psalms 30-34 | Day 16 Psalms 79-85 | Day 26 Psalms 123-132 |
| Day 7 Psalms 35-37 | Day 17 Psalms 86-89 | Day 27 Psalms 133-139 |
| Day 8 Psalms 38-43 | Day 18 Psalms 90-94 | Day 28 Psalms 140-150 |
| Day 9 Psalms 44-49 | Day 19 Psalms 95-101 | |
| Day 10 Psalms 50-55 | Day 20 Psalms 102-104 | |

PRAYER DEFINED AND EXAMINED

Westminster Shorter Catechism #98:

Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

And more fully examined:

As *creatures* endowed with the blessing of life, approaching their *Creator*:
We offer up **PRAISE** and **ADORATION**
(ADORATION for what God is; PRAISE for what God does)

As *sinners* guilty in the sight of the law, approaching their *Judge*:
We offer up **CONFESSION**

As *sinners* forgiven by God's grace, approaching their *Savior-Redeemer*:
We offer up **THANKSGIVING**

And as *children* adopted into the family of God, approaching their *Father*:
We offer up **PETITION** and **INTERCESSION**
(PETITION for what we need; INTERCESSION for the needs of others)

Here, then, are the elements which in their aggregate represent the fullness of prayer, as expressive of the fullness of our relationship with God, who is our Creator, Judge, Redeemer, and Father, in whose presence we stand as sinful but forgiven creatures – and amazingly, as his very children.