

God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

Invitation to Fullness

Psalm 1
6.7.20

*How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
² But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.*

*³ He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.*

*⁴ The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*⁶ For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.*

Today we begin a series on The Psalms. Lots of people read the Psalms. It's the longest book IN the Bible. It's the center of the Bible so if you sort of let the Book fall open, it will probably open THERE.

On the surface, it's a collection of prayers and reflections on God, life and spiritual things. The book is made up of a different of genres (wisdom poems [like TODAY'S Psalm], historical poems, complaints, confessions, laments, songs of praise). It was written by a number of authors (poets/psalmists) over many centuries (David wrote at least 73). Jewish people and Christian people have always considered this collection to be THE school of prayer; the vocabulary of the soul (Eugene Peterson) comes from this great book. AND also it's not without its difficulties!

This year we're using a fairly recent work by a theologian named O. Palmer Robertson. He spoke here at Park Road some years ago and has taught at all the major seminaries that feed our denomination. His book, *The Flow of the Psalms* (2015), attempts to detect an outline or cohesive plot-line in the whole collection.

You probably know that there are 150 Psalms but did you also know that there are five books that make up the Psalter (Book of Psalms)? The first book is 1-41 and it ends in a variation of how all the books end, with the words: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.” (41.13)

Palmer Robertson gives a title or theme to each of the five books and the first 41 psalms (Book One) he labels “Confrontation.” There’s a cosmic battle underway; an adversary (the mystery of iniquity) has challenged the infinite, eternal unchangeable God and at some point, in the fullness of time, a singular Hero will arise to overthrow the enemy. Good will finally triumph over evil. But, for now, in all human history, the battle/confrontation rages.

In the ancient world of Israel’s kingship, the confrontation played out in the struggle of Israel’s king with Israel’s rivals and their gods. King David was established as the head of the line or family FROM WHICH this singular Hero would be born...

And in many ways David is a type or symbol of this Royal Redeemer. The conflict is always simmering (in every age) and as David is engaged with enemies (in his generation) so the Ultimate King would engage and defeat all His and our enemies even the last enemy (1 Cor 15.26) for ALL generations.

Today’s Psalm sets up this CONFRONTATION theme. Life is a struggle. There’s a description of TWO OPPOSING WAYS (“the righteous and the wicked”, v. 6) – the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent – rivals. AND this Psalm is the Doorway into the Temple of the Psalms that helps us process the conflict before God.

This Psalm INVITES us into the life that’s full and solid and weighty. It draws us into the whole book where our souls learn to speak, to pray, to practice the Deep Life into which we’ve been called.

So let’s look at this gateway to the Psalms, Psalm One, as:

1. An Invitation to the Practice of Deep Life
2. The Key to Sustaining the Practice

The process of spiritual development into which the Psalms invite us is prayer. And at this point before I go any further, I want to SHUT DOWN what may be a conclusion we could draw from that statement. Some may THINK I’m saying that the way to get God to like you or bless you or save you or accept you is by praying... BUT that is not what I’m saying!

As we teach from the whole Bible, we always insist that there are two basic ways of life and religion, spirituality. We often call them “Karma and Grace”.

All religion/morality/life in general works on the basis of KARMA – cause and effect, work and paycheck, good deeds and reward... Grace, on the other hand, turns that upside-down and says, “God rewards the UNdeserving and the morally messed up before they deserve it and THEN their lives begin to change.”

We don't earn or deserve or cause God to bless us... He just does it on the basis of what Jesus Christ has earned and deserved FOR us: He lived the life we should have lived and died the death we deserved to die... THAT'S why God blesses or saves or favors us – it's because Jesus Christ represents us: Grace.

But when we get grace (not because we shape up or because we change) WHEN God gives us His favor that we never deserved, it begins to change us and set us free.

And the book of Psalms is saying, “one way you get the grace of God deeper into your life so that it does indeed change and liberate you is by prayer”. Prayer is one of the primary ways to exercise trust in God... and that trust is how we receive grace. Again, prayer doesn't save you or make God bless you; prayer doesn't pry open God's stingy fingers or manage God (that's the way of Karma). BUT prayer is a way of receiving the free and undeserved grace and favor that God gives... it rests on God.

At first, grace affects our character like water on a potted plant that's very, very dry. Have you ever watered a plant that was so dry the water just sort of beads up and runs off? And the only thing you can do is soak the plant for a long time? Well, prayer is a way of soaking in the grace of God so that this liberating grace saturates us and gets down to our roots, our decisions and our drives and changes NOT just surface behavior but our motives/desires.

Psalm One uses this kind of agricultural/organic imagery. The one way is the easily blown-away life (“life-lite”). The image is chaff, the stuff that blows away in the process of winnowing wheat. It's fluffy inconsequential, unsettled, unstable and restless.

The other life/way is rooted, not swayed by bad advice or influenced by destructive behavior or popularity. This rooted life is not a needy life that wants to fit in at any cost – to be seated in the seat of the scoffers is a way of saying, “belonging”.

The advice he accepts, the behavior (path) he acts out and the associations he maintains are selective ...deliberate. And it all stems from a deep source of pleasure he has tapped into: he delights in being instructed by the One who really knows all the facts...all the information. “His delight is in the Law of the LORD”, i.e. Torah/Law may be better translated: the teaching or instruction of the LORD.

This deep or rooted person TRUSTS that the One who PLANTED him also knows what will lead to his flourishing. There is Someone who knows me better than I know myself, “For the LORD

knows the way of the righteous.” That word (Heb: “yada”) carries a sense that God knows me intimately and I trust/delight in THAT... it nourishes me to the roots!

This gateway Psalm, is not saying, “Just repeat this magic formula... just say this incantation or this rote little spiritual mantra and all your wildest dreams will come true” (Again, that’s Karma, not Grace!). But instead, this Psalm, as the entry to all the Psalms, this Psalm is inviting those who know the delight of grace, the deeply satisfying JOY of being known/accepted by God and enrolled in His school of spiritual formation, it’s inviting us to come in.

Prayer, in this way of seeing things, prayer becomes NOT so much a way of getting stuff from God but a way of responding to grace...a way of letting God’s favor seep down into us...a way of BECOMING what God has DECLARED/DESTINED me to be.

Prayer responding to grace begins with meditation. It’s not the kind of meditation that’s used in Eastern practice that tries to empty the mind but INSTEAD it fills the mind. He looks at Scripture and fills his mind with it and it becomes a kind of conversation between his deepest self and the God who knows that self. God, our Father, speaking by His word, and the soul, listening, actually reflecting and contemplating, not on “Ommmm” (as in Eastern meditation) but ON WHAT GOD HAS SAID. And what God has said becomes so important that this person of grace is arrested by it. She stops and pays deep attention, muses on God’s teaching. Meditate in Hebrew means growl (lion/prey – Isa. 31.4)

As you journey into this Book of Psalms, you’ll find that a lot of Psalms are ... not really what’s on your mind at all! If you’re unfamiliar with the Psalms you may feel, at this point in the sermon, “I can’t wait to read this Book! It’s full of grace...like a tree rooted by a river! I can’t wait to read it and be comforted and filled with peace and warm feelings and joy.” Well, what you’re actually going to find is a lot of difficult stuff... about deep and painful emotions and about enemies and things we’d RATHER not consider.

This way of praying is not simply about stroking our souls but shaping our souls. It’s making us happy (“Blessed is the man...”) but NOT in that fluffy kind of fun we see on the beer commercials...but rather a deep and unshakable joy that’s not dependent on circumstances... rooted.

The Psalms are NOT the prayers and meditations that might rise out of our idolatrous imaginations. These are prayers that come not so much from our experiences or our hearts but prayers that stretch us and reshape us. Eugene Peterson wrote this about praying the Psalms:

No, they argue and complain, they lament and they praise, they deny and declaim, they thank and they sing. On one page they accuse God of betraying and abandoning them and on the next they turn cartwheels of hallelujahs. Sometimes we suppose that the proper posture of response

to God as we read the Bible is to be curled up in a wingback chair before a cozy fire, docile and well-mannered... The Psalms show us something quite different: prayer is engaging God... The engagement, at least in its initial stages, is more like a quarrel than a greeting, more like a wrestling match than a warm embrace. (Eat This Book; p.104-5)

See, if God waited for us to shape up...and if we could shape up enough to be truly good people then maybe we'd feel at home in the Psalms... but God treats us like we're perfectly good even before we actually are (that's what GRACE means). And therefore, the Psalms don't always feel so comfortable and cozy. They're expressing not so much what we've experienced but where we're headed and what we WILL eventually BE in practice.

In the end, I have to ask myself, WHO is this blessed man in this Psalm? Is it I? Do I qualify?... Do YOU?

Sometimes we use the word "man" in a non-gender-specific way, e.g. "before ancient man invented the wheel". That doesn't mean necessarily that it was a man... might've been a woman...just that some ancient human invented the wheel. But this Psalm uses a Hebrew word that IS gender-specific. And the way it was translated into both Greek and Latin preserves the male-ness of the main character in this Psalm...like Someone specific is in mind.

Is it possible that this Psalm is both universally applicable to both men AND women of faith but that it ALSO has some specific Character in mind, a Man ... the only Man who ever really, truly, unflinchingly and impeccably delighted in ALL the Law of God?

Ancient readers saw it that way: that this is a picture of the One described in the 45th Psalm in these words, "You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy." That 45th Psalm is also quoted in the NT Book of Hebrews where it's specifically applied to one Man, Jesus Christ the God-Man (1.9; Emmaus Road – Luke 24)

This Psalm will lead us into a deep life of meditation, ONLY if we see it applying first and foremost to the Messiah who obeyed the Law for me. He, David's descendant, fulfilled the Law from the heart! He savored the Father's will like we savor great food. (John 4.34; 6.38; 17.4).

And yet...even though I don't always obey that way... and maybe rarely obey that way...STILL, IT IS WHERE I'M HEADED! The One Man who perfectly delighted to obey, who was the fruitful Tree, yielding His fruit in the fullness of time (Gal 4.4, Rev 22.2) – HE BECAME THE TREE CUT DOWN for me...so that I could be declared righteous...and delightful in the sight of God...so that obedience and prayer could become the true delight of my soul... not a slavish burden meant to move a stingy God to bless me but a relief because I am responding to the blessing and favor of My Father.

And this Tree...cut down by death is risen. God has grafted me into Him...so the sap of new, resurrected life could begin to infuse His joy into me.

So...I'm learning to pray with my older Brother. When I don't "feel" like praying or meditating on God's instruction – I go to Him, to Jesus Christ. I repent and ask Him to be my confidence.

I'm holding His hand as He teaches me to pray. He invites me...He invites US – everyone who trusts Him with their souls – He invites us to pray the Psalms with Him... He is the key to prayer and to the Psalms...even when they are an uncomfortable classroom... He walks with me, stands for me and sits with me in prayer...He knows me...and that makes prayer (in the midst of conflict) a relief... not a burden.