

The Psalms
Pastor Joel Stamoolis
Wasilla Bible Church
February 28, 2010

Larry Kroon: I came across a prayer in a book I was reading recently on Christian leadership. And a harried pastor had written this prayer, and it started out like this. It said, "O Holy One, there is something I wanted to tell You. But there were bills to pay, there were meetings to attend, there were tasks to do, there were errands to run, there were friends to see. And I forgot what I was gonna say."

Well, in our church Joel, our worship pastor, is the one who is tasked with the challenge of making sure we don't forget what it is we need to say to our God. And so when we approached this element of our Old Testament overview that we've been going through, and we were planning our sermon schedule, and I wanted to have one Sunday where we just stopped and looked at the psalms—those psalms of prayer, and praise, and worship—my thought was immediately "I want Joel to teach that," for two reasons. Number one is I want our church to have his heart. And then number two is I want us to learn how his heart gets to be the way it is. And so we tasked Joel with this. I told him, "Joel, you cannot have a guitar in your hands. You cannot strum anything with strings. And you're gonna have to stand front and center," ...on our worship teams he kinda floats around various places... "but you gotta be front and center, and you're going to have to speak, not just sing." But take us into the Psalms.

Joel Stamoolis: Well, as you know, I haven't preached very many sermons—I could count them on two fingers (after this morning, of course). What I've spent more time doing is writing worship songs; and I've found that the preparation is fairly similar. For one, you need to spend a lot of time in a particular passage of Scripture (in this case a whole book of Scripture), and any time you spend a lot of time in the Word, usually the Holy Spirit convicts and slowly changes us. Conviction: it's what my good friend Luke Tegeler calls "getting punched in the spiritual gut," and I definitely got punched in the spiritual gut preparing for this morning.

Sometimes my prayers are meager. What I mean is sometimes I ramble, I lack clarity, I lack focus. Too often I lack perspective. Anyone who has gone through one of this year's application groups knows how powerful it can be to pray with the attributes of God in mind. Far too often I lack this perspective, which usually then means that my prayer also lacks faith. Simply put: sometimes my prayers are meager. And I take great comfort in the fact that God knows our need even before we ask and that His own Spirit intercedes for us. Yet because God takes prayer that seriously, I want to learn to pray well. I want to learn prayer.

Not only are my prayers too often meager, but far too often God blesses me and I fail to give Him thanks and praise. He'll richly pour out His grace in my life and I won't even take the time to notice, let alone rejoice in Him. I do take some comfort in the fact that God will receive His due honor and praise, for if we fail to praise Him even the rocks will cry out. Yet because God takes praise and thanksgiving that seriously I want to learn thanksgiving. I want to learn praise.

In fact, God takes these things very seriously. The Scriptures tell us there are three things we ought always to be doing. "*Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks, for this is the God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" Rejoice: take joy, take delight in God. Pray: literally petition, ask things of Him. And give thanks: express your gratitude toward Him. It's God's will for us that we do these things. Far too often we ask the question, "What is God's will for my life", forgetting that so much of His will for our lives has already been revealed. It is His desire in Christ Jesus that we rejoice, that we pray, and that we give thanks. Well, how do we learn to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks?

Well, how do we learn any skill? Instruction and practice. And God has not left us without instruction in this area. He's given us His Holy Spirit as a guide, and he's given us the Scriptures. In the Scriptures we've got Jesus teaching on prayer; He teaches on rejoicing, He teaches on giving thanks. And He models these. We have other Biblical examples, also—the prayers of Paul, the prayers of Elijah, the prayers of Moses. And what's more, there's an entire book devoted to this subject: the book of Psalms, which is what we'll be talking about today. The Psalms is a large book, very diverse. But throughout it all the text is either rejoicing in God, praying to Him, or giving thanks.

What are the Psalms? Well, the Psalms are ancient Israel's songbook...they are a collection of songs, which is how they get their name. It comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, which originally referred to the playing of stringed instruments and then eventually to the sacred songs usually sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. As a worship pastor I do get asked, "What did the psalms sound like in ancient Israel?" Answer is nobody really knows for sure because they didn't use musical notation, and there certainly weren't any recordings; so while there are a few musical indications given in the text, it's essentially a songbook of lyrics only. But what a treasure! In the psalms we have a lyrical response from the people of God to their God.

This year we've been studying the story of God's redemptive grace from beginning to end. And the Psalms make a fascinating companion to the Old Testament narrative literature in that they are a response to God's story. They also make an interesting companion to the law and to the prophetic literature because they are a response to God's Word. The Psalms respond to what God has done, is doing, will do, and to what He says. This is actually why they are divided into five sub-books. I don't know if you've ever noticed the divisions, but if you flip through the book of Psalms you'll see they are divided into five books to mirror the five-book division of the Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy, which is the foundational account of God acting and speaking in the Old Testament.

What's particularly gripping about the Psalms is that they are a response from God's people, which means they're born out of human experience and emotion. And the Psalms run the gamut of human experience and emotion: danger, fear, excitement, joy, anticipation, anxiety, peace, exaltation. You name it, they run the gamut of human experience and emotion.

But what's most intriguing about the Psalms is that ancient Israel, and the New Testament writers, and Jesus, Himself, considered them to be the inspired Word of God. Which means they're not just a response from God's people to God, but they are a God-given response to God. Eugene Peterson put it this way: "Most of Scripture speaks to us. The Psalms speak for us." Or to put it another way, most of Scripture is meant to be heard; the Psalms are literally meant to be in our voices. They are a God-given response to God. This is why they can teach us how to rejoice, how to pray, how to give thanks. They are a God-given response to God; and as such they're not just ancient Israel's songbook, but they become the songbook of the church, from its early days to the present.

We can say that they are both historical and timeless. They are historical in that they are rooted in history. They were written at specific times and places, with specific situations in mind. A great example is Psalm 51. Some of the Psalms will tell you the circumstance in which it was written. (And I realize the font's a little bit small in this.) But this says Psalm 51, "a psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." This Psalm was written about a very specific sin in David's life. It's historical, and yet it's timeless in that it was written for God's people to sing for years to come. He writes at the top of the Psalm, "for the choir director." And those who sang and who still sing Psalm 51 find in it the words to confess their own sins. "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.*"

The Psalms are historical and timeless. Just remembering this fact can help clear up a lot of confusion when we read them. For example David, who wrote many of the Psalms, had a lot of people who wanted to kill him; King Saul hunted him for years. King Saul is dead now; it's fairly safe to say he doesn't have a price on any of our heads. So how do we relate to these psalms of David that deal with protection from enemies? And how do we pray them? Well, they're historical, they're specific to David's situations. But they're also timeless. For while it's not Saul, we do have an enemy. Peter tells us "*Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour,*" an image, incidentally, straight out of several of the psalms. Paul puts it this way... "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil.*" Paul then tells us, "*Put on the full armor of God, stand firm, and pray.*" Well, how do we pray against the spiritual forces of evil? The Psalms can teach us.

The Psalms can give us voice to pray, to rejoice, and to give thanks. When I say they can give us voice I mean give us the words, but also patterns for prayer, and also perspective as we pray. It's hard to summarize 150 Psalms succinctly, but as you read through them you'll find a number of common elements and traits. First of all, they are honest, sometimes brutally honest. They hold nothing back before God. The Psalms will ask questions. Psalm 13 begins, "*How long, O LORD? How long will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?*" Far too often we get frustrated with God and we clam up, and we avoid Him. If you're frustrated with God, talk to Him about it. Ask Him; He will answer. And you see this in the Psalms, and God will speak in the Psalms in the first person and will often answer to the frustrations of the psalmist. Not only do the Psalms ask questions of God, but they ask things of God. They ask Him for things. They make requests. And they generally do so with

focus and intention. I like it how David puts it in Psalm 5. "*I will order my prayer to You.*" 'I will lay it out.' Just the fact that David takes the time to write it out shows a degree of intention and focus. And the Psalms give thanks, and they do so in all circumstances, even when it's difficult to give thanks. Psalm 22 is a great example. It begins with the cry "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*" The psalmist is obviously in a very tight spot. But then he goes on to express gratitude for God's deliverance in the past and to look forward to a future deliverance. See, the Psalms remember. They always have this perspective. They remember and they rejoice. They remember God's deeds, they remember His promises, they remember His people. The Psalms remember and rejoice in God's character. The attributes of God are described and cherished in great detail in the Psalms.

And lastly, like all of Scripture, the Psalms point us to Jesus. They will talk about our sin, our need for a savior, and they'll describe that savior. They'll call Him "The Anointed One", which is what "Christ" means. They'll call Him the King, the Son. Oftentimes you'll be reading in the Psalms, and you'll be reading a verse and it seems like that applies so directly to Jesus. And it applies to me, but only vicariously through Him. There are numerous examples of this. I'll give you one. Psalm 16:10. It says, "*You won't allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.*" Peter, as he's preaching on this text in Acts 2, he tells the crowd, 'Look, David is dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. He wasn't talking about himself. He was pointing to Jesus, who has been resurrected.' The Psalms point us to Jesus, which makes sense for they are a God-given response to God, and a response that has been cherished by the church throughout its history.

Throughout church history Christians have sung Psalms. For a lot of church history they chanted the Psalms, and this is due primarily to the nature of Hebrew poetry. In English poetry, as well as the poetry of other European languages, we like to have uniform length of each line, and it's nice if the words rhyme at the end. Hebrew poetry is not concerned how long each phrase is, they don't rhyme words, but ideas. We call this parallelism. It's probably the most distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry. "*I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.*" The first line states an idea; the second line restates it but with different words and different nuances. Sometimes the first line will state an idea, and the second line will expand upon it. "*My soul will make its boast in the LORD; the humble will hear it and rejoice.*" Sometimes there's a contrast. "*The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing.*" This is what I mean by rhyming ideas.

But this last verse is also a great example of how the length of a line can really vary in Hebrew poetry, which is the main reason that the church chanted the Psalms...because with a simple chant melody you can fit in as many words as you need to. What they would do is take a line from one of the Psalms and use it as a chorus or refrain, which they called an antiphon. For example, Psalm 25 could have the antiphon "*Lead me in Your truth, O LORD, and teach me.*" Then they would chant the psalm using a simple melody that would allow some freedom for the irregularity of meter in the text. "*To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in You; let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me. Lead me in Your truth, O LORD, and teach me.*"

By the time of the Reformation there was a renewed emphasis on congregational singing. And part of that, there was a renewed emphasis on chanting the Psalms. But they also started to do something new. They started to translate the Psalms a little more freely and putting them into strict rhyme and meter; basically taking Hebrew poetry and turning it into English poetry, which meant that they could then sing the Psalms to hymn tunes and other familiar melodies. They would call these collections of metrical translations metrical Psalters. So the same verse 1 from Psalm 125 in a metrical Psalter would sound like this: "*To Thee I lift my soul, O LORD; I trust in Thee, my God; let me not be ashamed nor foes exult o'er me.*" These metrical Psalters became very popular. In fact, the first book published in English-speaking North America was the *Bay Psalm Book*, a metrical Psalter published in 1650. They were popular throughout Christendom. In the 18th century over 250 different hymnals were published but over 450 different metrical Psalters. Today Psalms are typically set as praise choruses. Most all the songs we sang today came directly from the Psalms: "My Soul Finds Rest", Psalm 62; "There's No One Like Our God", Psalm 113. Whatever the musical setting, throughout its history the church has sung the Psalms, and Christians have found voice to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks.

But it follows that the Psalms can only give us voice, to pray, to rejoice, and to give thanks, in as much as we are willing to spend time in them. And if we're really gonna learn how to rejoice, and how to pray, and how to give thanks, then we need to spend time in them beyond our singing together on Sunday mornings. Which means you need to spend time with them. The fun thing about the Psalms is you can spend time in them musically, and there are a number of ways to do this. If you can read music and you like ancient music, chant is a great way. A good resource I'd recommend is *The Plainsong Psalter*. Plainsong is another word for chant. Metrical Psalters are a great way to spend time in the Psalms, and you don't need to be able to read music to use one. All you need to know is a couple familiar tunes. The most famous English language metrical Psalter is the *Scottish Psalter*. And

they managed to translate all the Psalms into common meter, which is 8 syllables, 6 syllables, 8 syllables, 6 syllables; which means that you can sing all 150 Psalms to the tune of “Amazing Grace” or “House of the Rising Sun” or any other common meter melody. I have a Tuesday morning men’s Bible Study, and we just finished going through a set of Psalms. And we used the Scottish Psalter to sing a couple of ‘em. We sang Psalm 121 to the tune of “O for a Thousand Tongues.” And we did sing Psalm 120 to the tune of “House of the Rising Sun”, which we thought works quite nicely. *“In my distress to God I cried, and He gave ear to me. From lying lips and guileful tongue, O LORD my soul set free.”* Anyway...

There are also a number of newer metrical Psalters that are great. *Sing Psalms* is probably my favorite of those. Some of them will come with sheet music; most metrical Psalters will just give you the words and then the poetical meter, however many syllables in each line. And all you do is look at the metrical index of any hymn book and find a tune that fits and sing it. I've actually left copies of a couple different of these Psalters at the information desk if anybody would like to look through them after the service. And, of course, we can spend time singing the Psalms by singing the settings that we sing on Sunday mornings. I love it, as a worship pastor, when people take the songs that we sing together on Sunday mornings, and they bring 'em home and sing 'em for the LORD. I try and encourage this whenever I can. In fact, this door on my left is always unlocked. Inside the room is a file cabinet, and in the file cabinet is all the songs that we sing on Sunday mornings. And the song files are available to anybody in the congregation. We have one simple rule—if it's the last copy of a chart, make a copy. But otherwise, just take an extra copy, bring it home, sing it to the LORD.

And you don't need to sing or play the Psalms to spend time in them musically. There are numerous recordings. Any contemporary Christian worship song writer who is serious about setting Scripture to music, has settings of the Psalms: Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin, Stuart Townend, just to name a few. My wife and I have recorded a couple CDs; over a third of our songs come from the Psalms. There is an Australian band called The Sons of Korah who sing nothing but settings of the Psalms.

And of course, beyond spending time in the Psalms musically, we can simply read them. You can read a Psalm a day, a Psalm a week. If you've never spent any time in the Psalms and you don't even know where to start, start with Psalms 23 and 32. It's easy to remember. They're two of the more famous Psalms, and they'll give you a good taste of just the vast richness that you find in the book of Psalms.

Now, I don't pretend to have any of the mastery of the Psalms. Like I said earlier, far too often my prayers are meager. But the time that I have spent in the Psalms has helped me to rejoice and to pray, and to give thanks. And I'd like to close this morning just by giving a few examples of what I mean by the Psalms giving us voice to pray, to rejoice, and to give thanks.

About seven years ago Pastor Ashley, who was then a soldier, was headed off to fight in Afghanistan. A small group of us were over at Jim Eller's house to pray for him. We went around the room praying for him. When it came my turn to pray, I found myself groping for words. I consider Ashley a dear friend, and I desire the best for him. Just didn't know what to ask for. I didn't know what to pray. I've never been to Afghanistan, I've never been in the military, I've never seen combat. I had no idea the difficulties he would face. And as I searched for words, Psalm 23 came to me. And so I prayed “Father, even though he will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, keep him from fear. May he know Your presence with Him. May he sense Your rod and Your staff.” And I was able to pray with clarity and with confidence.

I'll give you another example. Just over a year ago somebody set fire to our church building. It was a Friday night. There were five ladies at the church at the time. One of our elders, Mark Doner, shared with me an experience he had early that next morning, early Saturday morning. See, Mark's wife and one of his daughters were two of the ladies that were in the church at the time the fire started. And Mark woke up early Saturday morning with a song stuck in his head. *“Had it not been the LORD who was on our side, all the waters would have drowned us.”* It was a setting I had written of Psalm 124. Mark got out his Bible, flipped to Psalm 124, read it, and gave thanks, acknowledging his own inability to protect his family, and rejoicing in God's deliverance.

Let me give you another example of the Psalms giving voice: Jesus on the cross. Hanging on the cross with the weight of the sins of the world upon Him he cries out; he quotes Psalm 22. He says, *“My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”* Now, there are prophetic implications to His quotation of Psalm 22, but at its most fundamental level, Psalm 22 helps Jesus to voice the agony that He's experiencing. And then He goes on, He quotes another psalm; He says, *“Into Your hands, I commit my Spirit,”* expressing His confident trust in the Father as He dies.

I'll give you one last example. This comes from Acts chapter 4. The disciples are in Jerusalem and they just can't stop talking about all that they've seen and heard. Peter and John are arrested; they're told not to speak any more about Jesus. They're threatened. They come back, they gather with the other disciples. Everybody gets together and they pray. But what do they pray? They pray Psalm 2. They pray, *"Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ."* And they go on, *"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence."*

Hopefully you recognize this prayer. It's the basis of our Prayer for Witness song that we sing every week. And it's a great example of the Psalms giving voice to the disciples. The disciples, they quote words from the Psalm; they use the words of the Psalm, but they also pick up on the pattern of the Psalm, question and affirmation, and they pick up on the perspective in the Psalm of God's sovereign rule to His Son. And from there they ask for confidence.

I'll ask you to stand. Our application this morning is pretty straightforward. It's very simple. Spend time in the Psalms. Learn from them. Take their words. Do what the disciples did...take the words of the Psalms and make them your own. Also pick up on their patterns, adopt their perspective, and let them help you to rejoice and to pray and to give thanks to our God. As we close we'll close with our prayer song. But before we sing I'd like to lead us in prayer from Psalm 2. I'll put some of the verses up on the screen, or you can follow along in your Bible. Would you join me in prayer.

Heavenly Father, why are the nations in an uproar, and the people devising a vain thing? Truly Father, they take a stand against You and against Your Christ. Father, there is a real resistance to You, to Your rule through Your Son. And we see this resistance. We see it so openly in nations like North Korea and Iran. But we see it clearly in our own country and in our own community. Father, I know of at least one man in our congregation who lost his job this last year because of his faith. I know of another whose job has been threatened. Father, we affirm, as the Psalm does, that You have enthroned Your King upon Your holy mountain. You have enthroned Jesus as King, and it is our desire to do homage to Him, and to continue to be His witnesses. Strengthen us, we pray.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Amen. Go in His truth, go in His grace.