

## OHUMC Contemplation Lab – Week 3: Praying the Psalms

What are the psalms?

- Songs, poems, prayers of others, prayer book of the Bible, poetic works of prayer

What characterizes them?

- **Metaphors & imagery** – God is my rock; the Lord is my shepherd
- **Parallelism** – Hebrew poetry had neither rhyme nor meter. The secret of Hebrew poetry is matching thoughts (“Hear this, all peoples; give ear, all inhabitants of the world”)<sup>2</sup>
- **Raw** – honest conversations with God that span every human emotion

Why poetry?

- A poem (a good poem, at least) uses its poetic form to probe deeper into human experience than ordinary speech or writing is usually able to do, to pull back a veil and allow the hearer or reader to sense other dimensions. Sometimes this provokes a shock of recognition: Yes, we think, I have felt exactly like that, but I’d never seen it so clearly. Sometimes the shock is of something new: I’d never seen that angle before, but now that I’ve seen it, I won’t forget it. Sometimes it’s a combination of both of these, and often more besides.<sup>3</sup>
- They speak in poetry or metaphor that is powerfully personal but inexplicable. Yet these psalms penetrate to levels of our soul deeper than logic, more poignant than reason.<sup>2</sup>
- The work of prayer is fully to explore and exploit the metaphor in terms of our own experience. Thus “table” does not mean simply what the speaker in Psalm 23 means, but it means all the good tables at which you have ever sat [...]. “Tears night and day” does not refer simply to the crying a particular psalmist did, but to all the times of crying in which you have engaged.<sup>3</sup>

Why care?

- Jesus had immersed himself in the Psalms. He had read them, memorized them, and prayed them. Jesus’ words of agony on the cross came from the Psalms.<sup>4</sup>
- Jesus and his contemporaries would have known the Psalms inside out. Paul would have prayed and sung them from his earliest years. What Jesus believed & understood about his own identity and vocation, and what Paul came to believe and understand about Jesus’s unique achievement, they believed & understood within a psalm-shaped world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Towns, E. *Praying the Psalms: To Touch God and Be Touched by Him* (Praying the Scriptures (Destiny Images))

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N. T. *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential*

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms, Second Edition: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, L. *Talking Back to God: Speaking Your Heart to God Through the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010)

Results of praying the psalms:

- Those who pray the Psalms day by day, when faced with a sudden crisis, will discover close at hand a line or two of a psalm that is already etched into the heart and mind and says just what they want to say, only most likely better than they could say it themselves in the heat of the moment.<sup>2</sup>
- When we memorize psalms, even saturate our subconscious mind with psalms, fragments pop to mind at important ministry moments with surprising frequency.<sup>4</sup>
- When we move methodically through the Psalms, amazing things happen. They have us listening to God. They have us praising God. Thanking God. Exploring our own souls. Confessing our sins to God. Blessing other people. Empathizing with the pain of others. Spewing our anger at God. Recalling God’s goodness. Asking God questions. Seeking God’s face. Being awestruck at his majesty. Trembling before his holiness. Basking in his love.<sup>4</sup>

Reading versus praying the psalms:

- Reading (more analytical): What does this mean historically/theologically?
- Praying (more contemplative): How is God speaking to my heart through these words?

How to pray the psalms:

- **Summarize/paraphrase** – take a few lines, summarize them in your own words. You can also turn them into a breath prayer (we’ll revisit that)
- **Personalize** – either for yourself (change ‘you,’ ‘your’ to ‘I,’ or ‘me’), or for someone else
- **Memorize** – move the Word into your heart
- **Combine with lectio divina:**

