

## Chapter 11

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### HOW SHOULD WE READ THE PSALMS?

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**T**he Bible is not just a book. It is relationship in words. God's word to men and women, boys and girls. A living action between the almighty Creator of the universe and his most cherished creation: humanity. We do not understand Scripture unless we hear in it the divine-human dialogue.

The Psalms prove this. In the beloved 150 songs and poems in the middle of the Bible, we witness not just God speaking to us, but the privilege we have of speaking to God. This is the essence of relationship: two parties interacting with each other. And what an interaction! The Psalms express the full range of states of the human heart:

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Thanksgiving and praise... "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps. 107:1).

Lament... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?" (Ps. 22:1).

Celebration... "I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven" (Ps. 123:1).

Wisdom... "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain" (Ps. 127:1).

Judgment... "Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents" (Ps. 69:24-25).

In the Psalms we find honest, sometimes brutal, expressions of the human heart. The Bible would not be valuable if it were a string of sentimental platitudes or religious propaganda. But it is not. The songs and poems that are the Psalms express the highest joy and the deepest sorrow. Their authors plead with God, shout at God, beg God for forgiveness. They exalt virtues and righteousness, and they condemn in the bit-

terest terms the ugly abuses people sometimes carry out. The Psalms teach about the attributes of God (“the LORD is my Shepherd,” 23:1) and the history of God (“[he] swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea,” 136:15). They speak of humanity’s great potential (“You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor,” 8:5) and the darkness of human depravity (“shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause,” 25:3).

So how should we read this “treasury,” as Charles Spurgeon called it? First, some facts. The Psalms were the songs written to be used by the Israelites in their worship life—both personal and communal. The titles on the Psalms indicate that almost half of them were “of David,” and some others are identified as being written by various composers—“sons of Asaph,” “sons of Korah,” Solomon, Moses. They were made into a collection after the Jews returned from exile.

The many quotations from the Psalms that appear in the New Testament reveal that these songs were deeply embedded in the minds and hearts of the Jews. Most people today love the Psalms, and whether they realize it or not, the poetry has much to do with it. After all, one could state the proposition: “God is timeless, but people come and go.” Or one could paint with words, which is what Psalm 90 does:

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A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.  
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—  
they are like the new grass of the morning:  
In the morning it springs up new,  
but by evening it is dry and withered. (vv. 4-6)

The Psalms are the most sensory part of God's word, including this delicious invitation:

Taste and see that the LORD is good;  
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.  
(Ps. 34:8)

So how should we read the Psalms with understanding? For one thing, we should read slowly and deliberately in order to take in the sights and sounds, taste, touch and smell in which the truth of God is contained. Try reading a Psalm a day aloud—which is how all people in the ancient world read. For millennia people have meditated on the Psalms, storing up their treasures, frequently to be recalled during critical times of life.

We should also pray the Psalms. Let the voice of the Psalm you are reading be your voice, even if your life circumstance is not the same of the particular Psalm you are reading. Put yourself in the shoes of the

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writer, and you will understand the realities in the Psalm. For example, sense the pathos in Psalm 137, composed in the exile:

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. (vv. 1-3a)

This should put a lump in our throats.

Do not look down at the Psalms with a magnifying glass. Pray them upwards with a megaphone. The word *heart* appears 131 times in this book of the Bible, which seems only appropriate since in the Psalms we have the heart of humanity reaching out to the heart of God.

What a privilege to have this pathway to God.