

Sermon      September 27, 2020

### Back to School with the Psalms Part 3: Relating to the Psalms

#### *Psalms Express What's Already in Our Hearts*

How many basic emotions do people have today? Not that many. There's happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, love, remorse, and maybe a few others to boot. How many basic emotions do you think our primitive ancestors had three thousand plus years ago when the Psalms were written? Fewer? More? If you are like the rest of us, you probably reason emotions were about the same back then as now.

What does this mean? It means those "ancient" words of the Psalms can still be very relevant for us today. The situations might certainly be a little different, but the feelings God's people expressed are just about the same as the feelings we have today. We're in luck then, because this means we have 150 Psalms of poetry that will assist us in shaping and expressing our hopes and dreams, our impatience and wondering, together with our deepest fears. When we hear and read the Psalms then, expect to find many things to which you can relate.

Poetry has that special ability to give a voice to what lies inside us. When we find ourselves grasping for the right words to get our feelings out - and we know how important it is for us to get our feelings out - the Psalms can speak for us. They provide us with the words we need to uncork the bottle and relieve the pressure inside us. Words of poetry have been instrumental in helping victims of violence, those suffering from addiction, severe guilt, or fear and anxiety. Psalms can help us through what we are feeling. They help us express ourselves to God.

Athanasius (who the creed is named after) wrote that the Psalms represent and portray in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. Martin Luther was also a great lover of the Psalms. Luther wrote,

***What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself.***

John Calvin prefaced his commentary on the Psalms, calling them, “an Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul.” To Calvin, the Psalms draw out all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities – all the distracting emotions with which people are in the habit of being agitated. Well said, Dr. Calvin!

### *Psalms Impress Us and will Change Our Hearts*

Last week we saw how metaphors in the Psalms often run two ways. They give meaning to a person or event other than ourselves. They also unfold additional meaning for our own lives. In a similar way, Psalms not only express what is already inside us, they will also form our feelings and inner life.

### ***Be angry, and do not sin; Psalm 4:4***

Here, we are reminded of and engage our anger at how so many disregard the Lord and his ways. Yet we are also led, because of that same anger, to flee from doing the same in our own lives and to be repulsed by those things we have done in the past we now know were wrong. The words of the Psalms give us a mirror. When we look into that mirror, we see the shape of a different soul. We see the soul the Holy Spirit is working to form within us. Luther wrote,

***We should adapt and adjust our minds and feelings so that they are in accord with the sense of the Psalms. For since the psalter [Psalms] is only a kind of school and exercise for the disposition of the heart, he sings in vain who does not sing in the spirit.***

What Luther is saying here is that when we are in the Psalms, the idea is for us to be actively, emotionally engaged in what we are hearing, reading, or singing. If we keep our hearts at a distance when exposed to the Psalms, they cannot perform that transformative work upon and within us. Perhaps this is a main reason so many find little pleasure in the hearing or reading of the psalter and spend very little time in it? Luther continues,

***First practice on one psalm, even one little verse of the psalm. You will progress enough if you learn to make only one verse a day, or even one a week, live and breathe in your heart. After this beginning is made, everything else will follow, and you will have a rich treasury of understanding and affection ... For this is truly to sing psalms, or, as the Scriptures say of David, to strike the harp with the hand. For***

***the light fingers of the harpist are the emotions of the heart moving about the words of the psalms.***

So there are the words of one of the great masters on how to work with Psalms. Luther's instruction sounds easy enough. And it is. It reminds me of the question, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer is, of course, "One bite at a time." This applies equally well when it comes to getting a handle on the psalter. Let's take a popular excerpt from Psalm 119 and give it a go.

***Forever, O Lord, your word  
is firmly fixed in the heavens.  
Your faithfulness endures to all generations;  
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.  
By your appointment they stand this day,  
for all things are your servants. Psalm 119:89-91***

These words give shape to our trust in an ever-present, ever-faithful Lord of all things. If God's faithfulness endures to all generations, that means it extends to us, too, and lo and behold we find ourselves in a continuous line of believers that will run until the last day. When we worry about the way things are going, do these words give us encouragement and confidence that the Lord is in control and will see this along according to his plan? Those are some of the elements we can draw from these words. There are many, many more to be distilled out of passages like this. Let's continue with this Psalm.

***If your word had not been my delight,  
I would have perished in my affliction.  
I will never forget your precepts,  
for by them you have given me life. Psalm 119:92-93***

Remember when that bad thing happened in your life? Maybe you were the cause of it. Maybe it came about because of something beyond your control. It would have crushed you and perhaps done away with you like the same experience has done with others. But Jesus was there in the midst of it all. He picked you up. He reminded you of his love, his grace, and his mercy. You got through that dark patch only because of the Lord. Because of him you are here today, are stronger than ever, and can live and tell about it. That's something these verses are expressing. Something to which we can relate. There is a lot more in there where that came from. If you spend some time on it, you will find much of it. Let's do one more section.

***I am yours; save me,  
for I have sought your ways.  
The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,  
but I consider your testimonies.      Psalm 119:94-95***

The psalmist says to God, "I am yours." Can we say the same? With all our divided affections, are we the Lord's? These verses penetrate through all our layers and pose that question to our most inner selves. Are we the Lord's? Well, not our whole self, if we are honest about it. Ok, so what part of us is the Lord's? Which parts have we not given over to God yet and have kept for ourselves? Let's flush those out so the Spirit can deal with them and relinquish them to God. This is going to take some time. But when it's all done, what a clean feeling we will have!

Over the next week, spend some time in Psalm 119. It's a long one, so its likely you will find a section that speaks to you. Find one and spend some time on it. Do what Luther says. Engage with it. Throw yourself into it. Hear the music of the harp of emotions that accompanies the words. Let the Psalm speak for you and unleash what's inside of you, waiting to come out. Then let it speak to you and reshape your heart and mind more into the image of Jesus. That is the path to becoming more adept at the psalter.

Next week I hope to delve deeper into this two-way nature built into the Psalms, some different ways the church has made use of it through the ages, and how it can continue to assist us today in our worship of and dedication to God.

Ron Breight, Pastor  
Christ Lutheran Church  
400 Barclay Avenue  
Forest Hills, Pennsylvania