

11-08-15

Songs in the Key of Life – The Psalms

The title of this message comes from the name of an album by Stevie Wonder many years ago. I was a big fan of his and still love his music. It reminded me of the Psalms. The title Psalms in Hebrew means songs accompanied by musical instruments. The Psalms also speak of real life situations.

Whenever God's people gather, whether in grief or celebration, they sing. The style of music changes, but singing remains a deeply-rooted part of our heritage. From the spontaneous choir at the Red Sea in Exodus 15 to the professional choirs David assembled among the Levites, songs run through the Old Testament like musical ribbons. And in the middle of it all – at the very heart of the Bible – is the book of Psalms, the hymnbook of the people of God.

(David Jeremiah, *Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible*, p. 89)

The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, and it is central to the Hebrews and to the Bible. It is made up of 150 chapters or songs of praise and worship to God. It is a compilation of five Psalters or separate song books authored by different people. Each song book ends with an outburst of praise – Hallelujah! Hallel – praise Hallelujah – praise to God (jah or yah – Yahweh).

In the history of the O.T. praise and singing are paramount. At the Red Sea when God delivered them from the Egyptians, the first thing they did was sing a song of victory – called the Song of Moses or “I will sing unto the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously, the horse and its rider were thrown into the sea.”

At the dedication of Solomon's temple the priests and singers gathered and sang praise to God. It tells us in 2 Chronicles 5 they played and sang together saying, **“He is good! His faithful love endures forever.”** The glory of God fell upon that place in the form of a thick cloud and the priests, singers and musicians couldn't continue their service because of the cloud, for the glorious presence of the Lord filled the Temple of God. That's the power of God manifest as a result of honest praise & worship. That's what we in the worship team pray for in this place – the powerful manifest glory and presence of God would fill this place and everyone in it.

In the book of Ezra chapter 3, it says that when the foundation of the temple was completed, the people gathered singers and musicians together to praise the Lord. They were descendants of Asaph (who wrote one of the Psalters of the book of Psalms. They followed King David's prescribed plan. **“With praise and thanks they sang this song to the Lord. ‘He is good! His faithful love for Israel endures forever.’”**

In Nehemiah chapter 12, when the walls were completed, there was a dedication service. Nehemiah put together two choirs of singers. They marched and sang moving in opposite directions until they met each other on the other side. They sang praises and gave thanks to God who was faithfully with them and gave them success in the rebuilding project.

Songs of praise and thanks led the way in all these events. Praise and singing is always first. We sing songs of praise and thanks first before hearing the preaching of the Word of God. This is a way of preparation of our spirits and even a means of grace to usher in the presence of God to our service.

“The book of Psalms is God's prescription for a complacent church, because through it He reveals how great, wonderful, magnificent, wise, and utterly awe-inspiring He is.” (NIV Commentary of N.T.)

I am not going to read a particular text today, since we just sang our text in every song starting at the opening hymn and all of the worship choruses. We **are** the text of this sermon today.

Not all the songs of the Psalms are happy songs, but all include the sovereignty of God and His unfailing love and deliverance for His people. Hallel! While this is Hebrew poetry, which is unique in itself, these songs are mainly situational songs. David being pursued by Saul in the desert and fearing for his life, writes a song crying out to God for help and protection and ends praising God for his love and faithfulness.

Our English translations make the Psalms sound very flowery and elite, especially the KJV, but... Eugene Peterson writes: *"The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people, couched in cultured language."*

Here's a bit of Bible Trivia for you... Did you know?

Ps. 118 is the middle of the entire Bible (depending on your translation?)

Ps. 117 comes before Ps. 118 and is the shortest chapter in the Bible.

Ps. 119 come after Ps. 118 and is the longest chapter in the Bible.

The Bible has 594 chapters before Ps. 118 and 594 chapters after Ps. 118.

Add up all the chapters except for Ps. 118 and it equals 1188 chapters.

1188 – Ps. 118:8 is the middle verse of the Bible and says...

"It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man." The central theme of the Bible.

There may be some dispute to this, but I thought it was cool enough to mention, if you have never heard that before. It's a common Internet thing that crops up now and again.

The five Psalters of the book of Psalms are laid out as follows and are said to parallel the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible – or Torah – or Law of Moses):

Psalter 1 – Ps. 1-41 and parallels Genesis – Theme: The great expressions of the need of the human heart... Ps. 23:1 – ***"The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not be in want."***

Psalter 2 – Ps. 42-72 and parallels Exodus – Theme: Grace and redeeming love. Ps. 46 – ***"God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble."*** As we heard last week by PJ.

Psalter 3 – Ps. 73-89 and parallels Leviticus – Theme: How to live in close fellowship with God – Songs of reverence and worship – exalting the majesty of God. Ps. 76 – ***"You are glorious and more majestic than the everlasting mountains."*** (NLT) or ***"Oh, how bright You shine! Outshining their huge piles of loot!"*** (TM)

Psalter 4 – Ps. 90-106 and parallels Numbers – Theme: wandering in the wilderness – the ups and downs of daily living – Victories and defeats – Still joyful songs mixed with sorrow and grief. The psalmist cries out to God in anguish! Ps. 102:1-3 – ***"Lord, hear my prayer! Listen to my plea! Don't turn away from me in my time of distress. Bend down to listen, and answer me quickly when I call to You. For my days disappear like smoke, and my bones burn like red-hot coals."*** (NLT)

Psalter 5 – Ps. 107-150 and parallels Deuteronomy – Theme: Helplessness and dependent obedience. Psalms of obedience and praise – Ps. 139:23-24 – ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends You, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."*** (NLT)

We have to remember that the Psalms, as all the books of the Bible, were written and compiled under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit. He has orchestrated these five books and their content to be where they are in the Canaan of Scripture for a reason. They are central to the thoughts of Scripture and physically central in their location in the Bible. What seems an unlikely coincidence to us sometimes, is really the preordained working of the Holy Spirit that we are just discovering now.

“There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs, low growls, as we chew on its meaty morsels. Such writing needs a special kind of reading – a dog-with-a-bone kind of reading.” EP

I would like to shift the focus of this sermon at this point to something on my heart that I pray you can and will apply to your spiritual life. **PRAYER** Specifically – Praying the Psalms.

Praying the Psalms will be revolutionary for you and your spiritual life and vitality.

David Jeremiah said, “Often when we cannot find words to express our fears, joys, longings, or sorrows, we find them in the pages of this book.” (*Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible*, p. 90).

You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed. (John Bunyan)

Prayer is surrender – surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook (anchor) and catch the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.

(E. Stanley Jones, *A song of Ascents*)

“The Psalms reflect every emotional experience of life.” (Ray Stedman, *Adventuring Through the Bible*)
So then how can we go wrong by praying the Psalms. There has to be some of them that can relate to your current situation and give you the encouragement you need to see you through.

Psalms 1-4 end with the words – AMEN and AMEN. The fifth Psalm ends with – **Praise the Lord!** That should give you an idea of where our prayers should take us. It all ends with praise to God.

No matter what each Psalm’s content, no matter how deep or complaining, they always turn around to end with a recognition of God’s presence and love. **AMEN – His faithful love endures forever.**

Eugene Peterson was burdened to provide people access to the terrific energies of prayer in the kind of language that these Psalms were first expressed and written by David and his successors, because he is convinced that only as we develop raw honesty and detailed thoroughness in our praying do we become whole, truly human in Jesus Christ, who also prayed the Psalms.

Let’s look at Ps. 100 – close to the way we sang it today (KJV) – we’ll read it now in the NLT ...

Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth! Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy. Acknowledge that the Lord is God! He made us, and we are His. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Enter His gates with thanksgiving; go into His courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise His name. For the Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever, and His faithfulness continues to each generation.

As we sang earlier, and as we saw in the first part of this sermon, this Psalm is a song of praise and worship. The subtitle in many Bibles says, A Psalm of Thanksgiving – and it is. So we sing and rejoice in the Lord and that is great. BUT ... It could be so much more at the same time.

When we sing a Psalm, we are actually praying if you choose to go there. Many times while leading you in worship, I will say – Let this be a prayer of your heart. That's what the Psalms can do for you – not just during our church services, but anytime you choose to read and pray a Psalm.

Sometimes it's good to read a different version of the Bible, especially if you are very familiar with a passage like a Psalm. If we have it memorized and very familiar to our brain, we tend to gloss over the details and eliminate any deep thought. Let's look at this same Psalm from The Message and see a different twist on it from a prayer perspective...

On your feet now – applaud God! Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourself into His presence. Know this: God is God, and God, God. He made us; we didn't make Him. We're His people, his well-tended sheep. Enter with the password: "Thank You!" Make yourselves at home, talking praise. Thank Him. Worship Him. For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever.

As you sing this, you can pray this. As you read this you can pray this. Rejoice in God who made you and loves you. He cares for you like a shepherd cares for his flock. Be thankful always and worship Him. His grace and mercy are new every morning and will last forever. AMEN.

I challenge you to pray the Psalms on your own time. Try it – you'll like it. Willy Costa and I used to get together downstairs in a classroom every Sunday before service and read and pray a Psalm together. It was powerful and meaningful for us as brothers and for the church service about to start.

John Ladore and I were talking yesterday at the Men's breakfast about Brain Chatter. This is when you set out to pray and all kinds of thoughts come racing into your mind. You can't concentrate on what you intended because of all the chatter in your head. Praying the Psalms is one way to help combat that. You read the Psalm first, which sets up the backdrop in your mind of the Word of God rather than just jumping into prayer cold. It gives you some focus and some ideas of what to pray and how to go about it in relation to your own life and circumstances. If you come to pray with an open mind, the enemy will fill that open mind with all kinds of thoughts of what you should be doing instead or have to accomplish later, etc. At the end of your time limit, you never really got into prayer. If you come to pray with your mind already primed with a Psalm, you are already thinking Godly and can use the text as a platform or springboard to accomplishing time with God.

Sometimes people run out of things to pray about. Their mind goes blank, like writer's block. They/We struggle to stay focused and either drift off onto other thoughts or fall asleep. Yes – prayer is a good cure for insomnia. So pray during a time when you are alert rather than the last thing you do at night.

If you thus pour out all your weaknesses, needs, troubles, there will be no lack of what to say. You will never exhaust the subject. It is continually being renewed. People who have no secrets from each other never want for subject of conversation. They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back; neither do they seek for something to say. They talk out of the abundance of the heart, without consideration they say just what they think. Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God. (Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*)

Many people think they have to use flowery words, or that they can't pray like someone else who is so fluent. You've missed the point of prayer. It is not about how you sound to others or what they will think of you. Prayer is intimate and relational with God. He accepts all prayers – simple or sophisticated. Actually, simple is probably better. My friend, George, used to say that when all is going well, we pray like this: "Oh thou faithful and loving God. You know the beginning from the end, and I bless you for the blessings in my life, yada, yada, yada." However, when our back is against the wall, and we are in a panic, we pray like this: "GOD! OH GOD! I NEED YOU NOW! HELP ME NOW!"

Francois Fenelon, a seventeenth-century Roman Catholic Frenchman, said about prayer:

Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart, its pleasures and its pains, to a dear friend. Tell Him your troubles, that He may comfort you; tell Him your joys, that He may sober them; tell Him your longings, that He may purify them; tell Him your dislikes, that He may help you to conquer them; talk to Him of your temptations, that He may shield you from them; show Him the wounds of your heart, that He may heal them; lay bare your indifference to good, your depraved tastes for evil, your instability. Tell Him how self-love makes you unjust to others, how vanity tempts you to be insincere, how pride disguises you to yourself and others.

We can learn to pray like this by reading and praying the Psalms. Every one of us could use a boost in our prayer life, and praying the Psalms may be just what you need and are looking for. You have 150 prayers waiting for you to relate to in this key and central book of the Bible. **START TODAY!**