

Special Section: Surprised By The Psalms

Language Of The Heart

The psalms meet us where we are, even when our feelings are less than godly.

By Thomas C. Parker



Illustration by Phil Boatwright

The Sunday after Easter in 1995 I was going to give my pastor a break and preach. My text was from the end of John, but something happened that week that changed my sermon plans. On Wednesday, a bomb demolished the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Innocent men and women, preschoolers, even babies, were ravaged by the explosion, and they were no more. Gone was the joy of Easter Sunday. Gone, too, was my happy postEaster sermon. Everyone I knew was devastated by the horror.

I was in a quandary. I didn't know how to pray, and I didn't know what to preach. What could I say about the people who wrought this violence? Several members of my church told me they were angry, but they did not know what to do with that anger. They seemed to feel that they were somehow unChristian for being angry. I knew that feeling.

How do you pray when you suffer or when people you love suffer? How do you pray when people you do not like (even hate?) get ahead? How do you pray when the world doesn't make sense? How do you pray when you have some doubts or are angry with God?

I found my answer in the book of Psalms. The psalms give us a complete picture of prayer. They take on the whole of life. They give us words for all occasions, from the height of joy to the depths of despair. The psalms let us feel what we feel. The psalms meet us where we are and give us words to say to God. They are a language of the heart.



Illustration by Phil Boatwright

That week, as I tried to figure out what to say about the bombers, what to pray about the horror, and what to preach about the devastation, I remembered the psalms. Now, I don't mean the nice ones—you know, the 23rd, the 91st, the 100th. I remembered that group of psalms called laments. As I read them, I found the right word to describe the bombers: "evildoers." As I read these psalms, I found the words to pray, "How long, O Lord?" As I read these psalms, I found a psalm to preach—the 94th.

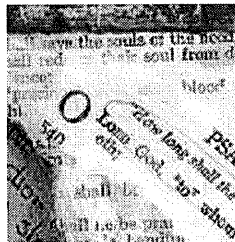


Illustration by Phil Boatwright

Honesty in Tragedy

"O LORD, the God who avenges, O God who avenges, shine forth. Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve" (Psalm 94:1–2). This is not something most Christians pray, but it is something most Christians feel at times. And during the week of the bombing, no one would have been upset with the idea that God is a God of vengeance.

"How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?" (Psalm 94:3). Is this a prayer of faith since it questions God? Who am I to question God? And yet, here it is, in Scripture, as words for us to pray. There may be people of perfect faith who never question, never wonder, and never doubt, but the rest of us sometimes wonder when God is going to act against evil. We have three possible responses to an Oklahoma City bombing: one, we can pretend that it doesn't bother us; two, we can get angry with God and never talk to Him again; or, three, we can tell God how we really feel. That's why I love the psalms, because they give us permission to tell God how we really feel. God, in His kindness, wants us to tell Him how we really feel, what we really think.

Psalm 94 concludes that God will indeed judge the wicked. While that is comforting, it is important to note that in this psalm the resolution only occurs by walking through the questions, the doubt, and the pain. We could say that the point of Psalm 94 is that God will judge the wicked, but if that is the point, why do we have this psalm in the first place? Why not just a proverb, "God will indeed judge the wicked"? It is doubtful that the truth of this psalm can be put in a nice propositional statement. If we did not have the shape, form, and words of this psalm, integrity would be lost. For this psalm has profound honesty, and we never want to lose honesty with God. Good theology is not just what you say, but how you say it. And this psalm teaches us how to pray. It does not force us to straighten up, sit down, pretend not to be angry, or not feel, let alone speak about negative emotions that "good Christians" shouldn't feel. Rather it gives us permission to pray as we are, as we see, as we feel.

Psalm 94 does not fix the present problem. Bad people do not immediately disappear after

we pray and recite Psalm 94. But it helps us to be who we are with God, and it puts our problem into His hands to solve. And while we may not be able to understand, praying honestly puts us in direct contact with the One who is able to transform both the situation and the problem.

Dealing with Reality

Psalm 73 is another psalm that helps us to deal with reality. It is called a wisdom psalm. The first verse is a nice confession of faith: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” We can’t help but say amen, but then we realize there is more involved than a new creed. “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:2–3). It is not that we want to be one of the arrogant or wicked; it is just that when we read about them in People magazine, we wonder how come they get the fat paycheck, the fast cars, and fabulous houses.

From Psalm 73:2 to Psalm 73:15 the psalmist vents his frustrations. He gets honest with God. But then something happens to him.

“Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!” (Psalm 73:17–19). Something happens when we worship with the community of God. We begin again to see the world the way we should see it. We begin to realize what God can do.

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand” (Psalm 73:21–23). A transformation takes place in the presence of God. The immediate situation does not instantly change, but the perspective does. We realize that we can be idiotic toward God. But even at those times God is with us. The psalmist does not get there by denying what he sees, but rather by taking what he sees to God. And we are given permission to pray this psalm or to pray like this psalm because it is a biblical prayer. When we entrust God with our most idiotic notions, we make Him Lord not only of our good parts, but of our bad ones as well. In this way He can have all of us. And in that time with God we can realize with the psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25–26).

Psalm 94 and Psalm 73 have “happy endings.” But there are psalms that do not end nice and neat, that do not fit into a sanitized worldview. Psalm 44 and Psalm 88 are two of those. They are prayers for times of deep emptiness. If they were not in Scripture, we might wonder about the faith of the authors. They might not be warm and fuzzy prayers, but they do keep the conversation with God going.

A god who only likes happy prayers is no god. Our God allows us to address Him, even challenge Him when we pray. If we can learn from God how to deal with pain and emptiness in our prayer life, will it be hard to talk to Him about our joy?Ê

But the laments are not the only psalms that provide a language for the heart.

Thanksgiving and Praise

The thanksgiving psalms provide another kind of language. They teach us to express our thankfulness for what God has done in our lives. A great example, Psalm 30, begins with a cry of praise: “I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths.” Then it refers to the psalmist’s previous prayer: “O LORD my God, I called to you for help” (Psalm 30:2). From there we learn of the Lord’s deliverance, “and you healed me.” The thanksgiving psalms help us

to remember that it was God who heard and answered our prayers. They express the joyful and evangelistic nature of thanksgiving. “Sing to the LORD, you saints of his” (Psalm 30:4). Not only do we sing praises to God, but we learn to tell everyone else of His deliverance.

Psalms of praise are second only to the laments in occurrence in the Psalter. If we want to learn to praise God for who He is and what He does, we need not go any further than the psalms. “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:1). “Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (Psalm 103:1). Once again the psalms understand how we feel; they put into words our awe and wonder of God. And they teach us as individuals and as communities to unite our hearts, minds, and lips in the praise of God.

Confession and Trust

The psalms give us words for so many different cries of our hearts. The psalms understand the depth of our sorrow of sinning against God. The seven penitential psalms (Psalm 6; Psalm 32; Psalm 38; Psalm 51; Psalm 102; Psalm 130; Psalm 143) teach us how to deal with our sin, and confront us in our times of confession. No book on prayer has taught me more on how to confess my sins to God. How amazing that God would provide words for us for the very times that we rebel against Him.

Other wonderful psalms point us to trust in God in times of trouble. I have visited people in the hospital who had every reason to lament, but their spirits drew near to God in a different way, through psalms that express trust in the Lord. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). “The LORD is my shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). “The LORD is my light and my salvation” (Psalm 27:1). The language of these psalms, while containing some direct address to God, is primarily reflective self-talk that reminds us of God’s greatness and goodness. These words provide comfort and truth in the midst of dark times. But they are not mere mantras to be chanted to “psych” ourselves up and out of our troubles. They are reminders of the One who is able to deliver us.

Praying in the Spaces

Many of us pray by using formulas and lists. These are not wrong, but to have a full range of expression with God we must be able to verbalize all our feelings in prayer. The psalms enable us to do that. They also teach us how to talk about the spaces—the emptiness—in our lives. They talk about every part of our lives—from the depths of doubt and despair to the heights of joy and wonder. God, in His kindness, allows us to come to Him as we are and to say what we think and feel as individuals and as His community. “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 118:29).

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Psalms In The New Testament*



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THOMAS C. PARKER is the director of Fuller Seminary Southwest, an extension of Fuller Seminary. At the seminary, he teaches Hebrews, Psalms, and the Old Testament courses. Tom was also a contributor to the *NIV Quiet Time Study Bible* (InterVarsity Press), helping with Hosea, Micah, and Ezra.