

Special Section: Surprised By The Psalms

Patterns For Prayer

Learning to pray with the psalms

By Howard Baker



Illustration by Andrew Powell

“Now I lay me down to sleep. . . . God is great, God is good . . . Our Father who art in heaven. . . . God bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa.” Many of us first learned to pray using such phrases. As we grew in prayer, we needed form and structure. They were provided through helpful devices such as the ACTS acrostic: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. But after a while, even these valuable helps can grow a bit stale. So we tend to flit from one prayer method to the next as quickly as a bird moves from branch to branch. All of these efforts accurately point to the reality that we, like the disciples, are crying out, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Mature prayer is a learned skill.

Learning to pray depends on two realities that require our intense participation: an awareness of the depth of our own experiences and the ability to articulate a response to God “out of the depths.” Most of us are acutely aware of the deep needs, joys, struggles, and questions that comprise our life situations. But are we able to respond to God in the midst of the stuff of life? This is where I was blocked in prayer. A journal entry of several years ago reveals the frustration that led me to the psalms:



Illustration by Andrew Powell

During the last year I have been drawn to the psalms because of the intensity and honesty of the struggles they portray in a person's relationship to God and the world. For years the verse about not knowing how to pray as I ought served as an excuse for my sophomoric efforts in conversation with God, when in reality God Himself had supplied a toolbox for constructing a meaningful prayer life. All of the formulas, acrostics, and gimmicks to make praying simple and easy are exposed as shallow in the face of the pulsating reality, life, and depth of the psalms as a guide to prayer. I learn to pray by praying and the psalms provide the pattern for me. As I pray the psalms, they leave their mark on my soul until finally I find my own prayers conforming to the original pattern.



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Only later did I learn that my experience with the psalms was part of a long and deep tradition within the church that has been shared by millions. J. L. Mays observed in his commentary on Psalms, "The psalms have been used widely and continuously to nurture and guide personal meditations and devotions. Christians have said them as their own prayers, as guides to learning to pray, and as texts through which they came to know themselves and God more surely."

The 4th-century bishop Ambrose called the psalms "a gymnasium of the soul." It is the place where we go for daily workouts in prayer fitness. Why are the psalms so effective in maturing us in prayer? Why have they worked so well for so many people for so many centuries? How can they bring new life and energy to tired "quiet times"?

The psalms teach us to pray honestly.

"Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?" (Psalm 88:14).

After a few months of praying the psalms, dramatic changes began to emerge in my relationship with God as this journal entry indicates:

The joyous result for me has been freedom to pray the full range of my feelings, whether positive or negative, without having my feelings dictating my response to God. I feel I have been given permission to be nakedly honest with myself and before the Lord. Now I know from experience that God is fully able to handle my honest, gut-level responses to the raw edge of life as I struggle before Him. It is a tremendous comfort to realize that honesty does not mean infidelity, but that honesty is prerequisite to fidelity.

In the crucible of honest prayer incredible transformation occurs. Mourning is turned into dancing, doubt becomes confidence, despair blossoms into hope, and pain becomes the vehicle for God's grace.

Jesus prayed honestly upon the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

(Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). When I, too, am honest with God about my “whys,” I will be given grace to pray with faith the prayer of surrender that Jesus prayed: “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Psalm 31:5; Luke 23:46). Often in these last few years I have felt the sting of the words of Psalm 31 as I prayed them: “I am forgotten as a dead man, out of mind, I am like a broken vessel” (Psalm 31:12, NASB). Yet I found hope from the same psalm as I continued to pray: “My times are in your hand” (Psalm 31:15), and “How great is your goodness” (Psalm 31:19), thus realizing that I am safe “in the shelter of your presence” (Psalm 31:20).

The psalms lead us into a conversation with God that is robustly honest and boldly uncensored. Prayer ceases to be a polite “Sunday dress-up” exercise and instead becomes communication that is intimate, passionate, and expressive of what is going on in the core of our souls. The psalmist says it best in the opening line of Psalm 130, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.”

The psalms teach us to pray comprehensively.

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7).

Many of the methods that claim to instruct in prayer only serve to reduce prayer by making it manageable and predictable. Formulas, in order to simplify, invariably omit part of who I am or part of what I am experiencing. Prayer then becomes smaller. It becomes a task rather than a life. And ultimately real life and prayer begin to exist in separate compartments with few points of contact. Prayer becomes a duty that I never feel I have sufficiently fulfilled.

In contrast, the call of the Bible is not to more prayer, but to a life of prayer—unceasing prayer, as the Apostle Paul expresses it. Jesus calls it a life of “abiding.” The psalms are the only prayer guide that enlarges prayer so that everything is pulled into it. Prayer becomes the great conversation. Nothing is too large or too small to be prayed.

In Psalm 2 there is a macro-prayer concerning the nations. In Psalm 6 and many other psalms there is micro-prayer concerning the state of my soul. And there is everything in between. The psalms are thoroughly inclusive and teach us to pray at all times and not to lose heart. They lead me to remember the poor, such as when I pray Psalm 113: “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (Psalm 113:7). They also give me confidence to cry out to God when I am the one who is needy: “Save me, O God” (Psalm 69:1).

I am continually surprised by the issues of life that we neglect to submit to prayer and thus become discouraged about. One friend was going through a very difficult time in his marriage and was despondent over it. No solutions were on the horizon. So I asked the somewhat obvious question, “Have you expressed to the Lord your despair, confusion, and hurt?” His response stunned me: “I haven’t because I feel guilty and ashamed.” When we hide our hearts from God we are avoiding the only One who can bring healing and transformation. Once my friend began to express his deepest self to God, the door of his life was opened to the comfort and hope that only Jesus can bring. The psalms help us open that door and keep it open.

The psalms teach us to pray in a God-centered way.

“My soul waits in silence for God only; . . . He only is my rock and my salvation” (Psalm 62:1–2, *NASB*).

The cause of many of our struggles in prayer is self-absorption. Prayer degenerates into a litany of my needs, my desires, and my concerns, with God serving as an adjunct to my agenda. The psalms deliver us from self-centered praying. Another journal entry chronicles this discovery in my experience:

Finally, I see that sincere praise is the final destination of the journey of prayer, though there may be several short stops along the way. This is the true work of prayer: to respond honestly to Jesus, the Word, circumstances, and relationships before the Lord so that the end result is the ability to worship in spirit and truth.

Psalm praying can begin with my agenda, but it always ends with God. With only a few exceptions, each psalm ends in praise. The Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is Praises. They lead us out of ourselves to the majesty of the Almighty God. Another 4th-century bishop, Athanasius, commented that the psalms not only stir up the emotions but also moderate them.

Eugene Peterson, from whom I learned to pray the psalms, says it best in his book *Answering God*:

The Psalms were not prayed by people trying to understand themselves. They are not the record of people searching for the meaning of life. They were prayed by people who understood that God had everything to do with them. God, not their feelings, was the center. God, not their souls, was the issue. God, not the meaning of life, was critical.

I can participate in God-centeredness when praying a psalm such as Psalm 16: “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing. . . . You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:2, 11).

C. S. Lewis in his *Reflections on the Psalms* refers to praying the psalms as an experience that is fully God-centered. “As I pray with the psalms I find my concerns, whether petty or important, leading me to God. I discover that in the midst of the chaos that is my life, God is creating, saving, and redeeming. And I can praise Him for it!”

The psalms teach us to pray responsively.

“The heavens declare the glory of God. . . . The law of the LORD is perfect” (Psalm 19:1; Psalm 19:7).

Prayer is the elemental language of response. I cry “Help!” when in trouble, say “Thanks!” when given a gift, complain when mistreated, say “Wow!” at a beautiful sunrise, or reply “I’m sorry” to a hurt friend. When these responses to life are addressed to God they become prayer.

God’s initiating Word demands an answer, just as any parent requires an answer when calling to a child. Though we often reverse the order, God is always the initiator and we are always responders. Nowhere is this more evident than in maturing prayer. The psalms provide us with 150 “answers” to God’s first words to us. The answer may be “Thanks!” or “Help!” or “Forgive me!” or a complaint or a praise. The psalms furnish us with a vocabulary for responding to God in every situation.

In *Pursuit of God* A. W. Tozer identifies three facts about the God to whom we pray: God is previous, God is present now, and God is speaking. Therefore the first word is God’s.

God has spoken in creation for which we have psalms of praise: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:1). God has spoken in salvation for which we have psalms of thanksgiving: “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me? . . . To Thee I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Psalm 116:12; Psalm 116:17, *NASB*). God has spoken through our circumstances, and the psalms of lament provide us response: “Evening, morning and noon, I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice” (Psalm 55:17). God speaks even through injustice, for which we have the imprecatory psalms (those that ask God to judge evil): “Rise up, O Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve” (Psalm


94:2). God speaks through our consciences so we are furnished with psalms of confession: “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me” (Psalm 51:3). Thus prayer begins with a listening attentiveness to God’s presence and voice in the world, in others, in the Word, in myself, and in my circumstances. The psalms give us a vocabulary with which to respond to God, with which to answer the Word He has spoken so eloquently and forcefully.

Just do it!

A friend whom I had encouraged to pray the psalms commented to me, “More than anything else in 30 years of being a Christian, praying the psalms has transformed my relationship with God.” This is a man who has been to seminary, who has been faithfully serving Christ, and who has been seeking the Lord for many years. Yet for him, it was the simplicity of praying the psalms that made the difference.

There is no secret or key to praying the psalms. We simply open our Bibles to the book of Psalms and begin. The traditional practice is to divide the psalms into 30 equal segments, one for each day of the month, and pray them. Daily. Sequentially. Simply let the words of the psalms be your prayer. You will begin to notice the connections with your life. You may want to journal about what emerges for you as you pray. Psalm praying is capable of unlimited adaptation. Experiment with it. Have fun with it. Keep in mind these words of Eugene Peterson: “This is how most Christians for most of the Christian centuries have matured in prayer. Nothing fancy. Just do it.” .

- » **See Also:** *On Your Own: Heart Cries*
- » **See Also:** *Sidebar: It’s A Group Thing!*

	<p>ABOUT THE AUTHOR:</p> <p>HOWARD BAKER is the spiritual director for <u>Young Life</u> in the Rocky Mountain region. He also teaches spiritual formation at <u>Denver Seminary</u>.</p> <p>Howard says, “If you give psalm praying a try, I would love to hear about your experience. Feel free to drop me a note via <i>Discipleship Journal</i>. Thanks!”</p>
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<p>On Your Own Heart Cries</p>

1. Match each psalm with the emotion it helps you express.

- ___ Psalm 2
- ___ Psalm 3
- ___ Psalm 8
- ___ Psalm 51
- ___ Psalm 73
- ___ Psalm 91
- ___ Psalm 103

- A. I'm scared!
- B. World events are out of control!
- C. I'm such a hopeless sinner!
- D. God has done so much for me!
- E. The bad guys are winning!
- F. Help! I'm in deep trouble!
- G. Your creation is glorious!

2. Describe a situation with which you are currently struggling (e.g., a difficult relationship at work, illness in the family, spiritual apathy, money woes).

3. Write a psalm about your dilemma. Begin by describing your troubles and how they make you feel. Then try to put into words what you know is true about God in spite of what your emotions might be telling you.