

# Pray the Bible

## Session #3: Praying the Psalms with Kevin P. Halloran

Welcome back to the module *Pray the Bible*. In the next two sessions, we will look at two especially helpful portions of Scripture that we can use for prayer. This session will focus on the Psalms from the Old Testament, and the next will focus on the prayers of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament.

My goal in each of these sessions is to introduce a category of prayers we find in Scripture and help you see how they can be useful for prayer.

### *What are the Psalms?*

The Book of Psalms is the only book in Scripture that is 100 percent composed of prayers. It is a treasure trove of theology-laden, emotion-driven songs of praise and lament.

Written by David, Solomon, Moses, Asaph, and others, the psalms offer prayers for just about every situation and emotion imaginable—from the deep pain of lament found in Psalm 88 to the exuberant worship of Psalm 150, and everything in between. They give us words for when our hearts fail us, and they serve as the emotional soundtrack of God’s worshiping people.

While they were originally given to Israel, the psalms have special importance for the Christian. Like the rest of the Old Testament, they point us forward to Jesus Christ and find their true fulfillment only in Him.

Jesus says as much in Luke 24. He says, “...*everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled*” (Luke 24:44).

Jesus, the true Israelite, embodied Israel’s hymnbook more than anyone else in history. The Savior’s life was so shaped by the psalms that He quoted them in His dying breaths.

The psalms also had special importance for Christ’s apostles, who prayed and quoted them often. The apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3:16:

*“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”*

One way for the word of Christ to dwell richly within us is to worship using the Psalms. They are a unique portion of Scripture with special value for corporate worship and our personal devotional lives.

I love what Scottish Missionary James Gilmour said:

"When I feel I cannot make headway in devotion, I open the Psalms and push in my canoe, and let myself be carried along in the stream of devotion which flows through the whole book. The current always sets toward God, and in most places is strong and deep."

I hope this session encourages you to push in your canoe and be carried along by the current of the Psalms toward God. Perhaps that's been your experience already. You've treasured the Psalms for many years like James Gilmour and used them for prayer.

Or perhaps you've found praying the Psalms more difficult than you expected. That was actually the experience of the late theologian J.I. Packer.

Packer grew up an Anglican and sang the Psalms in church from his earliest days. Even though he heard for years how the Psalms were for prayer, Packer admitted to it taking about twenty years of being a converted and mature believer to truly understand how they were models of praying.

Why this problem, especially for someone like J.I. Packer who had such a sharp mind and Psalm-filled background? Packer thought about it, and records two reasons why he struggled with the Psalms in his book *Praying*. This is how his co-author described it:

First, the psalmists, being poets, jumped around logically, presenting their thoughts more like flowers in a bunch than like links in a chain, and since J.I. has a linear, lawyerlike mind, this bothered him.

Second, the psalms show a concentrated, uninhibited, almost ferocious intensity in the way that they say—shout, rather—their "Help!" and their "Thanks!" This was something that J. I.'s cool inner restraint could not cope with.

Part of Packer's problem was understanding the genre of the Psalms, and the other part was how the Psalms clashed with his own personality.

Packer later realized there was a deeper reason he struggled with the Psalms. This deeper reason was that even though he could explain many things about prayer to people, his co-author says "he still hardly knew experientially what praying with his whole heart really meant."

Praying with our whole hearts is really what the Psalms are all about.

### *Using the Psalms for Prayer*

We will now look at three suggestions for praying the Psalms.

Let me start with this: Don't feel like you need to master everything I say. Simply opening the Bible to Psalms and praying is an incredible way to draw near to God. The information and tools I share now can help you draw out more of the riches of the Psalms and thus deepen your experience in praying them.

**Suggestion #1: Understand the genre of poetry.**

Remember, this was part of J.I. Packer’s problem. And understanding the basics of how the biblical genre of poetry works will help us remove barriers to praying the Psalms.

There are two main types of Psalms: The first is **Lament** – which is simply a response to the bad in the world. These often express sorrow at challenges in the life of the Psalmist and sometimes complain before God. There is a sinful type of complaining that forgets the goodness of God, but there is another type of complaining that rightly processes life in our broken world through the eyes of faith—that is what the Psalms of lament help us do.

The second type of Psalm is **Praise** – which is a response to the goodness of God. These Psalms rejoice in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, often recounting His glorious character and wonderful deeds in Israel’s past and sharing reasons to praise His holy name.

So, lament and praise are the two main types of Psalms, although some Psalms have elements of both, as you might expect to see living in a fallen world governed by a good God.

There are a few more basics to know about the genre of poetry and how the writers express themselves.

The Psalmists often use one of three types of **Hebrew Parallels**. This is where there is a relationship between two lines of poetry.

There are Synonymous Parallels. These lines share the same idea in different words like in Psalm 6:1:

“O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,  
nor discipline me in your wrath.”

There’s also Building Parallels. This type has the second line building upon what is said in the first like in Psalm 6:4:

“Turn, O Lord, deliver my life;  
save me for the sake of your steadfast love.”

The second line repeats the idea from the first of the Lord delivering the Psalmist, but adds a reason, “for the sake of your steadfast love.” Not only do we see an example of a Hebrew Parallel that builds, we see the reasoning behind a petition—something useful to look out for as we pray the Psalms.

The third type of parallel is the Contrast Parallel. This is when two lines contrast each other like in Psalm 1:6:

“for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.”

The Psalms also express themselves using **imagery and metaphors**. Instead of saying “God cares for His children”, Psalm 23 says “The Lord is my shepherd.” Instead of saying, “I was weak”, David says “my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Psalm 32:4). We need to ask ourselves *what is this image describing and how does that relate to the situation of the*

*psalmist?* These images cry out for deeper reflection and meditation. As we meditate on these images and metaphors, we enter into the situation and prayers of the Psalmist in a special way.

The last thing to look out for is the **tone or emotions of the Psalms**. Is what you read joyful? Desperate? Heavy and sad? Remember, this also was part of Packer's problem: his personality didn't mesh with some of the raw emotion expressed by the Psalmists. We may not want to go where the Psalmists's canoes lead, but in a fallen world filled with sin, death, evil, diseases, and people opposed to God, we need to learn to process the bad things of life in a biblical way.

The psalms are sometimes an acquired taste, something we have to learn to fully appreciate, and that often comes through study and praying them over time. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer had it right when he said, "The more deeply we grow into the psalms and the more often we pray them as our own, the more simple and rich will our prayer become."

### **Suggestion #2: Understand the various audiences of a Psalm.**

The Psalms are incredibly versatile prayers that have been prayed by a variety of people in a variety of situations over the millennia. Recognizing the various audiences a Psalm speaks for will enrich our prayers.

Here are three audiences to keep in mind:

1. *The Original Audience*. Some of the Psalms give detail into the situation of when it was first prayed. Those details add texture to our reading of the Psalm. The superscription may provide information, and several times in the life of David there is a specific passage from 1-2 Samuel at the background of the Psalm. Understanding that portion of Scripture well will help us read the Psalm David wrote during that time for all its worth. And when there is no hint at the specifics of the original situation, which is a good chunk of the Psalms, we can interpret Psalms more generally.
2. *God's people*. The Psalms have been used corporately for thousands of years. Ask yourself, *how might have Old Testament believers prayed this? How might we, new covenant believers, pray this today?* The beauty of keeping God's people in mind as we pray the Psalms is that it widens our perspective from our life and our problems to all of God's people throughout the ages. It helps us remember we're not alone in this world, and that others have and are experiencing what we face in life.
3. *Christ*. Ask yourself, *how does this Psalm point to Christ, and how might Jesus have prayed this Psalm?* Sometimes it's easy to recognize like when a Psalm contains prophecies that Jesus fulfills. Thankfully, the New Testament helps us here since the book of Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. So, as you read the New Testament, look for how it can shed light on Jesus as the One who embodied the Psalms.

Let me share a few examples. If you read through the passion narratives in the Gospels, you will note that Jesus quoted the Psalms on the cross. Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 with the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He quoted Psalm 31:5 when He said, "Into your hand I commit my spirit." His cry from the cross "I thirst" was fulfilled in Psalm 69:21 that says, "for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink."

The second example is in Hebrews 10:5–7. The author to the Hebrews writes, “When Christ came into the world, he said...” and then the author to the Hebrews quoted Psalm 40. This is saying that Jesus spoke the words of Psalm 40.

Knowing that Jesus spoke those same exact words will give us a richer understanding of Christ and the Psalm.

### **Suggestion #3: Understand how you can use a Psalm for prayer.**

I think you will be encouraged by this practical point that shares five ways to use the psalms for prayer:

#### 1. *Use the Psalms to Warm up your heart.*

When reading the Psalms, we see others having a productive conversation with God and we get in on the conversation. Reading the Psalms might warm your heart up for prayer like an athlete jogging to warm up before a game. You may have several go-to verses or entire Psalms you incorporate into your prayer routine, or regularly cycle through the Psalter in your devotional times, but this is one way to let the strong devotional current of the psalms draw you in so you reach God. Let’s look at Psalm 100 for example:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!  
 Serve the LORD with gladness!  
 Come into his presence with singing!  
 Know that the LORD, he is God!  
 It is he who made us, and we are his;  
 we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.  
 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
 and his courts with praise!  
 Give thanks to him; bless his name!  
 For the LORD is good;  
 his steadfast love endures forever,  
 and his faithfulness to all generations.

How can you not want to worship after reading the words of Psalm 100?

#### 2. *Pray the Psalms Verbatim.*

We see many examples of this in scripture. Praying the Psalms word-for-word gives you words when you lack them.

My wife and I often want to end our day seeking the Lord but lack mental and physical energy from work and a busy family life. So, we sometimes read a Psalm to the Lord and camp out on a verse or two that strike us. It helps us cleanse our spiritual palate from the events of the day and give our final moments to God in prayer.

#### 3. *Learn from the various structures of the Psalms.*

Many psalms showcase a journey of faith and trust. Take Psalm 13 for example. David begins the Psalm launching a **complaint** in verses 1-2, with four questions starting, “How Long?”

**How long**, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

**How long** will you hide your face from me?

**How long** must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

**How long** shall my enemy be exalted over me?

David is clearly distressed that God seems distant while he is filled with sorrow and oppressed by his enemy.

David continues his prayer in verses 3-4, with a **plea for God to answer**:

**Consider** and **answer** me, O Lord my God; **light up my eyes**, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,” lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

David concludes in verses 5-6 with a declaration of trust:

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

In this Psalm we see a structure of first complaint, then a plea for God to answer, and finally an assertion of trust.

David’s situation didn’t immediately change, but he made the decision to rejoice in the Lord. That is a simple structure we can follow as we pray through anxious times. We can unload our complaints to God in faith. We can cry out to God to answer and help, even presenting arguments before Him like a lawyer would before a judge. But ultimately, we need to come to a place of trust and joy in God beyond our circumstances.

So, as you read the Psalms, note the flow of certain Psalms and learn from them.

#### 4. *Treat the Psalms like an Apple Tree.*

As you read the Psalms, grab a verse or two like you would grab an apple from a tree.

A family member recently bemoaned a situation where someone wrongly accused her and prospered because of it. She said, “I just wish I knew how to think and pray in this situation!” That made me think of *Psalm 37*, which is for that exact situation. There are many commands in this Psalm that tell us exactly what to do:

“Fret not yourself because of evildoers” (verse 1)

“Trust in the Lord, and do good” (verse 3)

“Delight yourself in the Lord” (verse 4)

“Commit your way to the Lord” (verse 5)

Our family member said, “That’s exactly what I need!”

How would you turn that to prayer? It could be as simple as, “Lord help me not fret myself because of evildoers. Help me to trust in You, delight in You, and commit my ways to You”—simply turn the commands of the Psalm into your prayers.

The beautiful thing in praying this Psalm is that the commands come with glorious promises:

Delight yourself in the Lord, **and** he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, **and** he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. (Psalm 37:4–5)

In other words, as you trust in the Lord, you can rest secure because God will eventually make it clear to all who is in the right.

Let me explain the power of praying this Psalm in this particular situation. As I already said, this Psalm presents commands to follow that result in great promises. As we ask God’s help in keeping the commands, our minds are not only instructed with how to think and trust God in an annoying situation, but we call upon God’s help to keep the commands. These commands are His will since they are in His Word, so we can be confident God will help us keep the commands, and since the results flow from keeping the commands, we can be confident God will help us reap all the glorious promises the psalm speaks of.

#### 5. *Treat the Psalms like a Christmas Tree.*

Instead of picking a prayer from the tree, you may take a prayer and hang it on the Psalm like you would hang an ornament on a Christmas tree. This may come in the form of expanding a portion of a psalm and adding other petitions that connect with your life and experience.

I recently read Psalm 115. Verse one opens, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.” Verse two continues, “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’” It appears that many were claiming God was not active or keeping His promises to Israel.

The Psalmist then continues to contrast our God in the heavens who does whatever He pleases with the futility of the idols that the nations serve in verses 3-8. But then I thought, how is it that I turn to worthless idols that not only do no good for me, but steal the glory due to God alone?

*So I prayed, Lord, show me the idols I serve. Help me rid my life of idols and serve you alone. I don’t want to lead my family or others into the same idolatry that tempts me, so please reveal to me hidden idols. When my heart cries like the world “where is my God?”, help me not fall into despair but to trust in You, my help and shield.*

Later in the Psalm, verse 12 says, “The Lord *has* remembered us; he will bless us”. That connects with verse 2. So, I added my prayers, *Lord, even when the world mocks Your children, I know You haven’t forgotten me. You have blessed me with every spiritual blessing in Christ and I will enjoy an eternity in Your presence. Thank You for remembering us and thank You for growing our faith and sanctifying our lives through trials and periods of waiting.*

That is one example of how we can hang our prayers on a Psalm like we hang an ornament on a Christmas tree. It's simply starting with a Psalm, grafting prayers from your life onto it so they can be shaped and transformed by the powerful Word of God.

### *A Challenge for Leaders*

I want to close this session sharing a challenge for leaders from one more New Testament passage that mentions the Psalms.

Ephesians 5:18–19 commands:

*“... be filled with the Spirit addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...”*

We see in these verses that one way to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to address one another in Psalms. This isn't a magic formula for life in the Spirit; but it does show how God wants a gathered body of believers to sing His praises together and address one another with the powerful Word of God, specifically the Psalms.

Yes, the Psalms are incredibly useful for our personal devotional lives and should be studied and meditated on as much as possible. But the Psalms are incredibly useful for building others up and living the Spirit-filled life as a community of believers.

My challenge to you is to ***address one another in Psalms***. It may be by praying portions of the Psalms in your small group, it may be by teaching others to pray the Psalms, singing the Psalms, or simply recommending a Psalm to a friend in need, but the result according to Ephesians 5 will be that God's Holy Spirit fills His people in a special way.

I hope you'll join us for the next session which moves to the New Testament and focuses on the prayers of the Apostle Paul.

© Kevin P. Halloran and *Open the Bible Courses*.

Permissions: You have permission and are encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format you choose (except posting to the Internet), as long as you do not alter or change the wording in any way and do not charge a fee (beyond the cost of reproducing these materials). Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Open the Bible, 1-877-673-6365.

Share feedback on *Open the Bible for Courses* content to [courses@openthebible.org](mailto:courses@openthebible.org).