How I Learned to Stop Hating and Start Loving the Psalms

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I have a confession to make. For years I hated the Book of Psalms. I knew that many Christians looked upon it as their favorite biblical book, that the church had incorporated these poems into public worship, and that overtones from the King James Version of Psalms still reverberated beautifully throughout the language. But, hard as I tried, I could never get excited about actually reading Psalms.

People around me seemed to use the book as a spiritual medicine cabinet: “If you feel depressed, read Psalm 37.” “If your health fails, try Psalm 121.” That approach never worked for me. Instead, I would with uncanny consistency land on a psalm that merely exacerbated, not cured, my problem. Church historian Martin Marty judges about a third of the psalms to be “wintry” in tone, and when feeling down I would accidentally turn to one of the wintriest psalms and end up frostily depressed.

More than anything, Psalms confused me. It seemed to contradict itself violently: psalms of bleak despair abutted psalms of soaring joy, as if the scribes had arranged them with a mockingly dialectical sense of humor. After a few minutes’ reading, though, the poems would begin to sound boring and repetitious, and I wondered why the Bible needed 150 psalms—wouldn’t 15 suffice to cover the basic content?

I tried to address the problem by studying the book systematically. I learned to appreciate the poetic craft involved in Hebrew parallelism, and to recognize the different types of psalms: imprecatory, lament, ascent, royal, thank-offering, and so on. After acquiring all this knowledge, I read the psalms with a heightened sense of comprehension but, alas, with no heightened sense of enjoyment. And so for years I simply avoided the book. You can find a psalm that says anything, I reasoned. Why bother with them?

I now realize how impoverished I was. In my fixation with the details of the psalms—their categories, interpretive meaning, logical consistency, poetic form—I had missed the whole point, which is that Psalms comprises a sampling of spiritual journals. They are personal letters to God. I must read them as an “over-the-shoulder” reader, for the intended audience was not other people, but God. Even the psalms for public use were designed as corporate prayers: God was their primary audience as well.

I suppose I had been unconsciously trying to fit the psalms into the scriptural grid established by the apostle Paul. But these are not pronouncements from on high, delivered with full apostolic authority, on matters of faith and practice. They are personal prayers in the form of poetry, written by a variety of people—peasants, kings, professional musicians, rank amateurs—in wildly fluctuating moods. Sometimes the authors were vindictive, sometimes self-righteous, sometimes paranoid, sometimes petty.

Don’t misunderstand me. I do not believe Psalms is any less valuable, or less authoritative, than Paul’s epistles or the Gospels. Nevertheless, the psalms do use an inherently different approach. They are not so much representing God to the people as the people representing themselves to God. Yes, they are part of God’s Word, but in the same way Job or Ecclesiastes is a part of God’s Word. We read the speeches of Job’s friends in a different way than we read the Sermon on the Mount.

Understanding this distinction changed the way I read Psalms. Formerly, I had approached the book as a graduate student might approach a textbook: I skimmed the poetry in search of *correct and important concepts* that could be noted and neatly classified. Psalms resists such systematization and will, I think, drive mad anyone who tries to wrench from it a rigid organizational schema. I began to approach it in a very different way.

Let me illustrate. I own a worn, black Scofield Reference Bible that belonged to my father. Because he died when I was 13 months old, I have no conscious memories of him. Yet even now I can learn something of his relationship with God by reading the notes in the margins of that Bible, for he used the white space to record a kind of spiritual journal. Certainly, he never had me in mind when he wrote those notes; I did not yet exist. But years later I can be moved, challenged, and convicted as I read about his relationship with God.

The psalms are far more formal than my father’s scribbled notes, of course. They came out of a common context, God’s covenant relationship with Israel, and were expressed in beautiful, sometimes highly structured poetry.

But now, as I read them, I begin by trying to project myself back into the minds of the authors—just as I project myself back into the mind of my father who wrote those fragmentary notes. *Could I pray these prayers?* I ask myself. *Have I felt this peculiar anguish? This outburst of praise?* I come to them not primarily as a student wanting to acquire knowledge, but rather as a fellow pilgrim wanting to acquire relationship. The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and all our souls, and all our minds. More than any other book in the Bible, Psalms reveals what a heartfelt, soul-starved, single-minded relationship with God looks like.

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Poetry works its magic subtly. In modern times, at least, we rarely seek out poetry in order to learn something. We turn to it because the poet’s shaping of words and images gives us pleasure and moves our emotions. Yet if the poet is successful, we may gain something greater than knowledge; we may gain a transformed vision. And that is the magic the psalms have ultimately worked on me. They have transformed my spiritual vision and my understanding of relationship with God in these three ways:

First, the psalms help me reconcile what I believe about life with what I actually encounter in life.

When I was a child, I learned this mealtime prayer: “God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for this food.” Its cadence has a certain incantatory charm, and indeed the prayer sounds as if it could have come from Psalms. What could be simpler than that prayer? Two foundational assertions of theology and a spirit of thanksgiving are all expressed in one-syllable words.

Yet praying that simple prayer with honesty and conviction has been for me, at times, an Abrahamic trial of faith. God is great? Why don’t we see more conspicuous evidence? Why is it that the scientists, who make their living studying the wonders of natural creation, are less likely than an illiterate peasant to attribute those wonders to God? Why have more Christians died for their faith in this century than in all others combined?

God is good? Why did my father, a young man with unlimited potential as a missionary, die before reaching the age of 30? Why did all those innocent Jews and Christians die without justice in the Holocaust? Why is the most religious portion of our population, inner-city blacks, the most poverty-stricken and hopeless?

Thank him for this food? I kept up that practice even through smartalecky days of adolescence, when I gave more credit to the abundance of American rivers and the wizardry of farmers. But what of the Christians in Sudan or Ethiopia? How can they thank God while dying for want of food?

If reading the last three paragraphs has made you slightly uncomfortable, perhaps you should read Psalms again. They are journals of people who believe in a loving, gracious, faithful God in a world that keeps falling apart.

The psalmists often expressed variations on the themes that I have mentioned. Why should those nasty Amalekites, Hittites, Philistines, and Canaanites, not to mention the juggernaut empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, take turns crushing *God’s chosen people*? Why should David, anointed by God to be king, spend a decade hiding out in caves and dodging the spears of Saul, whom God had ordered to step down? How can they be thankful when there seems so little to be thankful for?

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Many psalms show their authors fiercely struggling with such questions. Sometimes the psalmists are able to align the emotions of faith with the doctrines of faith in the very course of writing the psalm. But sometimes they cannot, and at this point the seemingly random ordering of the 150 psalms comes into play.

The most startling juxtaposition of psalms occurs early on. Psalm 23, that shepherd song of sweeping promise and consummate comfort, follows on the heels of Psalm 22, which opens with the words Jesus quoted from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Both psalms are attributed to David, but the two could hardly form a more glaring contrast.

True, David does find some sort of resolution in Psalm 22, by looking ahead to a future time when God will rule over the nations and the poor will eat and be satisfied. But he makes clear how he feels at the moment of writing: “I cry out by day, but you do not answer.… I am a worm and not a man.… Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me.… All my bones are out of joint.… My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.” Such sentiments are light years away from “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.… Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.”

Another juxtaposition occurs with Psalms 102 and 103. The first (subtitled “A prayer of an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the LORD.”) eloquently expresses the despair of an aging, weakened man who feels abandoned by all friends, and by God. It reads like a catalog of pain scratched out by a hospital patient in a feverish state. Yet the following psalm is a majestic hymn of praise that includes not one note in the minor key.

I doubt many pastors choose to preach on those two psalms together—one or the other, maybe, but not both. But I have learned to appreciate Psalms simply because it does encompass both points of view, often adjoined with no calming transition. “Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits,” says Psalm 103. The author of its nearest neighbor is trying his best not to forget God’s benefits, but that’s no easy task in his condition, with his bones burning like glowing embers and his diet consisting of ashes and tears.

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I, for one, am glad my Bible includes both kinds of psalms. A time may come when I will feel like the author of Psalms 22 or 102, and if that time comes, I will take comfort in the fact that spiritual giants—most notably, Jesus himself—have felt that way too. And although I may groan and cry out and resist the trial that has me in its net, I will also try to remember the wonderful message of Psalms 23 and 103.

Taken together, the 150 psalms are as difficult, disordered, and messy as life itself. Oddly, that fact gives me great comfort.

**Primal-scream Prayers**

You don’t have to read far in Psalms before encountering some troubling passages—such as vengeful outbursts of fury tucked away in the midst of elegant pastoral poetry. Some seem on the level of “I hope you get hit by a truck!” schoolyard epithets. “Imprecatory psalms,” these are called, or sometimes, “vindictive psalms,” or, more bluntly, “cursing psalms,” because of the curses they rain down on opponents.

What are such outbursts doing in the midst of sacred Scripture? Readers have proposed various explanations.

1. *The cursing psalms express an appropriate “righteous anger” over evil*.

Prof. Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* tells about asking his undergraduate class at the University of Chicago to identify an evil person. Not one student could do so. “Evil” simply did not exist as a category in their minds. Our inability to recognize and identify evil, says Bloom, is a sign of grave danger in our society.

I have received great help on this issue from my wife, who works near an inner-city housing project. She sees pervasive evil every day: the gangs who snipe at sidewalk pedestrians with automatic rifles, the policemen who rough up innocent people because of skin color, the thieves who knock down senior citizens outside the currency exchange where they cash their social security checks.

A few months ago my wife came home boiling with anger. A janitor was tyrannizing the residents of one senior citizens’ building. He would use his master key to enter widows’ apartments, then beat them up and steal their money. Everyone knew the culprit, but because he wore a mask and could not be positively identified, the city housing authority was stalling on his transfer or dismissal.

If Allan Bloom had asked my wife to describe an evil person that day, he would have gotten a vivid description with no hesitation. And precisely that kind of structural evil—corrupt judges, slave owners, robbers, oppressors of the poor, racists, terrorists—was what the psalmists were responding to.

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The “righteous anger” explanation may illuminate the motives behind the cursing psalms, but it does not remove all the problems they present. Although furious, Janet did not stalk around the house muttering threats like, “May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes” (Ps. 109:10), or, “Happy is he … who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Ps. 137:8–9).

2. *The cursing psalms express a spiritual immaturity corrected by the New Testament*.

C. S. Lewis, who seemed almost embarrassed by the cursing psalms, discussed this approach in his book *Reflections on the Psalms*. He contrasted the psalmists’ spirit of vengefulness with another spirit (“Love your enemies,” “Forgive them for they know not what they do”) exemplified in the New Testament. “The reaction of the Psalmists to injury, though profoundly natural, is profoundly wrong,” Lewis said.

Having observed nothing comparable to the psalmists’ vengeful spirit in pagan literature, Lewis developed a rather complicated argument related to the election of the Jews. “Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst,” he said. The Jews’ “higher calling” had led to a snobbery and self-righteousness that came out in such inappropriate ways as the cursing psalms. These arguments did not endear Lewis to the Jewish community; a few years ago, the *Christian Century* published an article by a rabbi taking offense at Lewis’s remarks.

Certainly Jesus introduced a new spirit (“You have heard it said … but I say unto you …”). But as Lewis himself notes, the Bible does not present such a clear-cut progression from the Old Testament to the New. Commands to love your enemies appear in the Old Testament as well. To complicate matters even further, New Testament authors quote approvingly some of the most problematic of the cursing psalms. Psalm 69, for example, is cited repeatedly. Peter applied one of its curses directly to Judas (Acts 1:20); Paul applied another (“May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever,” Rom. 11:9–10) to unbelieving Israel. Cursing psalms are not so easily dismissed.

3. *The cursing psalms are best understood as prayers*.

The cursing psalms appear in a considerably different light when we remember their literary context: We readers are “overhearing” prayers addressed to God. Seen in this way, the cursing psalms are what I have called “spiritual therapy” taken to its limits.

If a person wrongs me unjustly, I have several options. I can try to wrong him or her back, a response condemned by the Bible. I can deny or suppress my feelings of hurt and anger. Or, I can take those feelings to God, entrusting him with the task of “retributive justice.” The cursing psalms are detailed examples of that last option.

Instinctively, we want to “clean up” our feelings in our prayers, but perhaps we have it all backwards. Perhaps we should strive to take all our worst feelings to God. After all, what would be gossip when addressed to anyone else is petition when addressed to God. What is a vengeful curse when spoken *about* someone (“Damn those people!”) is a plea of helpless dependence when spoken to God (“It’s up to you to damn those people; only you are a just judge”).

One reason I lean toward this way of understanding the cursing psalms is that I have read the end of the story in the Book of Revelation. In that book we see a preview of a time when the very worst of the cursing psalms will come true. Even the most notorious, Psalm 137, finds fulfillment: “With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again” (Rev. 18:21). Justice will reign absolutely someday, and accomplishing that will require a time of cataclysmic violence against evil.

I see the cursing psalms as an important model for how to deal with evil and injustice. I should not try to suppress my reaction of horror and outrage at evil. Nor should I, Rambolike, take justice in my own hands. Rather, I should take those feelings, undisguised, to God. As the books of Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk clearly show, God has a high threshold of tolerance for what is appropriate to say in a prayer. He can “handle” my unsuppressed rage. I may well find that my vindictive feelings need his correction—but only by taking those feelings to him will I have that chance for correction and healing.

Second, the psalms teach me how to praise.

Americans are notoriously bad at adoration and praise. We have not the tradition of British subjects, who curtsy to the queen and wait for her to speak first. We feel more comfortable roasting our politicians in comedy revues than bowing to them.

Frankly, the whole notion of God asking us to sit around saying nice things about him can seem rather alien. Why does he need our praise anyway? As C. S. Lewis said in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, “I don’t want my dog to bark approval of my books.”

Lewis goes on to suggest that we might best imagine praise by thinking of our instinctive response to a great work of art, or a symphony, or extraordinary beauty in any form. The natural response is, first, to pause and enjoy the surpassing beauty—almost as if kneeling before it—and then to announce it to other human beings. Such a response of shared enjoyment works on many levels: “The Northern Lights were spectacular in the Boundary Waters!” “I wish you could have been with us in Venezuela—we flew up this canyon and suddenly the clouds parted and there was Angel Falls.” “Weren’t the Chicago Bears devastating yesterday?”

Praise takes the instinctive response of shared enjoyment (Ever try keeping a great joke to yourself, or the fact that you just got engaged?) and raises it a few notches. In praise, the creature happily acknowledges that everything good and true and beautiful in the universe comes from the Creator. That acknowledgment expresses our proper position before God. It works on us as well as on God, by reminding us of who we are with respect to him.

According to Psalms, praise need not be sober and reflective. The psalmists praised God with sensuous abandon, with loud musical instruments and dance and incense. Their worship services may well have been closer in tone to a sports pep rally than a sedate symphony concert.

Many of us stumble over how to express praise in a culture in which it seems alien. The wonderful contribution of the psalms is that they solve the problem of praise deficiency. They provide the words; we merely need to enter into them, aligning our inner attitudes with the content of the psalms.

Evidently, when the ancient Hebrews encountered something beautiful or majestic, their typical response was not to contemplate the scene, or to analyze it, but rather to praise God for it. Their fingers itched for the harp, their vocal cords longed for the hymn. For them, praise was joy expressing itself in song and speech, an inner health made audible. And because of them, we too can enter into that health.

Third, the psalms give me a model of spiritual therapy.

Not long ago I wrote a book titled *Disappointment with God*. The publisher worried over the title. It seemed faintly heretical to introduce a book with a negative title into Christian bookstores filled with books on the marvelous Christian life. But in the process of writing the book, I found that the Bible, and especially Psalms, includes detailed records of people disappointed with God (to put it mildly). Some psalms could be accurately titled “Furious with God,” “Betrayed by God,” “Abandoned by God,” “In Despair about God.”

It may seem strange for sacred writings to include such scenes of spiritual failure, but actually their inclusion expresses an important principle of therapy. A marriage therapist will often warn his or her new clients, “Your relationship may well get worse before it gets better.” Grudges and resentments that have been covered over for years may resurface. Misunderstandings must be nakedly exposed before true understanding can begin to flourish.

The 150 psalms present a mosaic of spiritual therapy in process. Doubt, paranoia, giddiness, meanness, delight, hatred, joy, praise, vengefulness, betrayal—you can find them all in Psalms. Such strewing of emotions that I once saw as hopeless disarray, I now see as a sign of great health. From Psalms I have learned that I can rightfully bring to God *whatever* I feel about him. I need not paper over my failures and try to clean up my own rottenness. It is far better to bring those weaknesses to him, for he alone has the power to heal.

The odd mixture of psalms of cursing, psalms of praise, and psalms of confession no longer jars me as it once did. Instead, I am continually amazed by the spiritual wholeness of the Hebrew poets, who sought to include God in every area of life. They brought to God every emotion experienced in every daily activity. For them, there were no walled-off areas; God could be trusted with reality.

Because many psalms were written by Hebrew leaders (73 are attributed to King David), the book offers a unique behind-the-scenes view of a people’s emotional history. I know of no comparable collection of private reactions to an ancient history. In Psalms we can read what a king prayed after committing adultery and murder, what he prayed after escaping an assassination attempt, and after losing a crucial battle, and after dedicating a new capital city to God.

That process of “letting God in” on every detail of life is one I need to learn from. In the busy, post-Christian, industrialized West, we tend to compartmentalize our lives. We fill our days with activities—getting the car repaired, taking vacations, going to work, mowing the lawn, chauffeuring the kids—and then try to carve out some time for “spiritual” activities such as church, small groups, personal devotions. I see none of that separation in Psalms. Somehow, those people managed to make God the gravitational center of their lives so that *everything* related to him. To them, worship was the central activity in life, not the thing to get over with to resume activity.

Psalms has become for me a stepping stone in the process of recognizing God’s true place at the gravitational center. I am trying to make the prayers first prayed by the Hebrew poets authentically my prayers. The New Testament writers did this, quoting Psalms more than any other book. And the Son of God on earth did likewise. He too relied on them as the language of relationship between a human being and God.

I am sure that making the psalms my own prayers will require a lifelong commitment. I sense in them an urgency, a desire and hunger for God that makes my own spiritual life look anemic by contrast. The psalmists panted for God with their tongues hanging out, like an exhausted deer pants for water. They lay awake at night dreaming of “the fair beauty of the Lord.” They would rather spend one day in his presence than a thousand years elsewhere. It was the advanced school of faith these poets were enrolled in, and often I feel more like a kindergartner. But now that I’ve started to read the psalms again, maybe some of it will rub off.