

## **Theological Reflections on the Book of Psalms**

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OT526: Psalms (Hebrew Exegetical Class)  
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After taking this class on the Book of Psalms, the Psalms have become much more important to me and I have come to know them in a way that I never have before. I realize that I want to continue to get to know each Psalm more. I want it to be a book that I continue to muse upon and pray over. I greatly appreciate the encouragement in Eugene Peterson's book to use the Psalms as prayer and to pray through the Psalms.<sup>1</sup> My wife and I are going to be using Peterson's book as a devotional book to read through together in order to help us learn how to pray the Psalms.

If I had to pick out an overall theme of what the Psalms mean to me and how I currently view them, I would say that the Psalms teach us how important it is to interact honestly with God in all circumstances. They also are used to allow God to interact with us and teach us how he interacts with his people.

As a person that tends to be fairly cognitive and mathematical in my approach to things, on being asked what the Psalms teach us or what they are used for, I previously would have said that they are used to instruct us about God. After taking this class I would have to change the way I answer that question. Although by looking at Psalm 1, 19, and 119 I can see that the Psalms are used for teaching and instruction, just as important they seem like windows into how the people of God honestly interact with him in every kind of conceivable situation. In fact the main point of the Psalms seem to be interaction with God, with prayers of every kind included. The Psalms include prayers for help, prayers of thanksgiving, laments, complaints, and praises. In this regard, I appreciate some of the

comments by Eugene Peterson. “Our habit is to talk about God, not to him. We love discussing God. The Psalms resist these discussions. They are not provided to teach us about God but to train us in responding to him.”<sup>ii</sup> “The Psalms train us in a conversation of language, from talking *about* God to talking *to* God.”<sup>iii</sup> I had never before noticed how much the Psalms include prayer and encourage us to interact with God in every kind of situation, good or bad.

In this paper I want to discuss what it means to interact with God and what it means to be honest with God. But before mentioning the details of honest interaction with God taught by the Psalms, it will be helpful to mention a couple of other items concerning how this class helped me to see the value of the Psalms and put a desire into me to spend more time in them.

First of all, it was a great experience taking the time to translate a few Psalms from Hebrew into English. Although I didn’t always take the time to contemplate on all the meanings that came out from my parsing, dealing with the Hebrew made me slow down tremendously so as to observe what the particular Psalm was really saying. One danger of Bible study in English tends to be our over-familiarity with many of the passages; for me that familiarity goes away when looking at them in their original language! I am now convinced more than ever that translating a biblical passage out of the original language is a critical step in really understanding what a passage is saying and observing first hand what its main point is.

For instance, I have enjoyed Psalm 19 for some time now. A number of years ago I set out to commit it to memory. I ended up memorizing the first half, concerning the heavens; the second half I already knew from songs I have grown up with. I realize now

that until writing an exegetical paper on this Psalm I have always taken it as two distinct Psalms, not realizing how it fit together. One of my favorite verses in the entire Bible that I quoted and prayed often was Psalm 19:14. But there were a number of things that I just took for granted, even though I didn't really understand what they meant. One thing I have read in this Psalm and in various places in the Bible (like in Genesis 1) is the word 'firmament'. I didn't really know what it meant, and was too lazy to look it up (and wasn't forced to). After doing exegetical work in Psalm 19 and reading multiple commentaries and articles on this Psalm, I now have an appreciation for this word and understand what it means and how it relates to other words often found in context with it. Also I didn't know what the word 'line' was referring to in Psalm 19:4. I now believe it really should be translated 'voice' as some of the more modern versions do. I have sung the phrase 'more to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold' for most of my life. I never fully understood what 'yea than much fine gold' meant, but it seemed to fit in well with the song. When translating it from Hebrew to English, the lights went on! I realized that it means that God's word is more precious than a lot of very pure refined gold. I think that I need to do more exegetical papers on more of the Psalms; I know I would discover things that I have always wanted to know but never taken the time to observe or clarify.

In talking about the language of the Psalms, I came to a new appreciation for the use of poetry. The Psalms use metaphors, rhythm, and repetition as literary devices to reinforce and drive home their main points. I saw this like never before as I was carefully considering and musing on Psalm 19, preparing for and writing an exegetical paper. I saw in that Psalm (and elsewhere) that poetry can be very powerful at conveying truth, more than merely presenting cognitive facts in the least number of words. It causes a person to

reflect and take notice of an idea being presented. The repetition in that Psalm made the point very clear. Metaphors and similes brought pictures to my mind to make a very vivid point; one that I have an image of and therefore will remember more easily.

Along with all the poetic details that the Psalms provide, I appreciated noticing something that they did not mention. What is not said is sometimes just as important as what is said. Unlike the Psalms, most books in the Hebrew Bible (as well as in the New Testament) give details about who wrote them and the occasion that they were being written for. In most cases the Psalms lack these specific details. As Tremper Longman points out, “As is increasingly evident, the Psalter is always relevant to the people of God. This feature is related to the lack of historical specificity.”<sup>iv</sup> Too often it seems that we read about something that happened in history and relegate it to a particular instance, divorcing it from having any relevance in our own lives. The fact that many of the Psalms are prayers that are not tied to a particular historical event makes it easier to appropriate them as prayers that can be applied to various situations in my daily life and the lives of those around me.

## LAMENTS

Now after mentioning some of these preliminary items, I would like to discuss two particular types of Psalms that we have talked about in class and read about in various books. I first want to talk about the types of Psalms referred to as ‘laments’ and then will talk about Psalms of praise. The area of our discussion in which I was most impressed and had a change in my understanding was in dealing with the Psalms that can be classified as ‘Laments’. It was in these discussions where I begin to see that the whole thrust of the Book of Psalms is to teach us to interact with God in all circumstances; and this interaction

implies the need for us to be bluntly honest with ourselves and with God. I am probably like most Protestant Christians in America today that have never really taken the time to question the implications of the prayers of loneliness, anguish, complaints, questionings, and other types of laments found in the Psalms. It is easy to skip over things that we don't understand in the Bible and just focus on the things that make sense to us; I realize that this may cause us to be cheated from some precious truths in the Bible.

In this regard, I really enjoyed a number of pages in Walter Brueggemann's book and have subsequently read them to other people in my household. As a summary statement he says, "It is the lament that preserves for us Israel's most powerful and eloquent statements of the effort both to survive and to be transformed as a people of faith. The study of the lament can provide important resources for our contemporary work of theology and ministry."<sup>v</sup>

One of the most transforming and liberating facts that I discovered from our class discussions and from reading the Psalms (and books about the Psalms) was the example in the Psalms of being absolutely honest with God. I have appreciated this fact and seen its importance in my own experience for a number of years now. But in reading through the honest writings of the psalmists and their prayers to God, it has highlighted that fact for me and given more insight into it. It is not only my individual experience and conviction that it is important to live in honesty with ourselves, with God, and with one another, this is also vividly exemplified in many of the Psalms. In this regard, I must quote from J. Clinton McCann because, in speaking of Psalm 13, he talks about this prayer of honesty in a very enlightening way.

We begin to see what the laments teach us about prayer and identity. Prayer is meant to be *honest!* Psalm 13 is bold, brash, even what many would consider

blasphemous: “How long will you hide your face from me?” We are accustomed to prayers that are nice, polite, phrased in flowery language. To be sure, we may pray for the sick and suffering and dying, but the really raw edges of our lives and experience are often eliminated from conversations with God. They are reserved instead for conversations with the clinical psychologist or the family therapist or the marriage counselor or the social worker or perhaps even the lawyer or the judge. This may be fine, of course, but Psalm 13 and the other laments instruct us that God expects to hear our complaints, our troubles, our turmoil. Nothing is ruled out!”<sup>vi</sup>

As McCann mentions, it is often easier to talk honestly with some other human being that is offering ‘professional help’ for our problems than it is to talk to God about them. Why is this? It may be that we have a real concept and preconceived idea about what kind of things we are supposed to pray for or what level of engagement God wants to hear from us in prayer. We somehow have the idea that our prayers to God should only be about good things, to show him how thankful we are for what he has done for us, or to ask him to help us through some difficulty we are facing. But to be bluntly honest with God and to tell him we don’t understand our current situation, or don’t agree with how we are being treated, or are angry with someone; we wouldn’t dare think that God would want to hear about that. Being angry doesn’t seem reverent! We may feel that it is okay to be angry, but not when we are in prayer. I wonder whom we are trying to fool, God or ourselves? Doesn’t he see us at all times and know exactly how we are feeling? Is he the only one that can help us through these hardships and calm our insides in the midst of incomprehensible circumstances?

It was amazing to see that laments are not just complaints. They are not merely venting anger during a difficult or unfair situation. But laments in the Psalms are always addressed to God! This is a highly pedagogical point. It is a normal human response to be angry at certain times. We shouldn't try to hide this anger or suppress it; but we should

know that the best thing to do is to lift our strong feelings to the only one that is really capable of changing situations or helping to change our attitude: the Living God. Walter Brueggemann has some excellent points on this matter of the Psalms teaching us honesty in prayer.

Most importantly, the laments show clearly that *biblical faith, as it faces life fully, is uncompromisingly and unembarrassedly dialogic*. Israel and Israelites in their hurt have to do with God, and God has to do with them. The laments are addressed to someone! And the hurtful issues must be dealt with precisely in the presence of God. Nowhere but with God does Israel vent its greatest doubt, its bitterest resentment, its deepest anger. Israel knows that one need not fake it or be polite and pretend in the divine presence, nor need one face the hurts alone. ...<sup>vii</sup>

The faith expressed in the lament is nerve – it is a faith that knows that honest facing of distress can be done effectively only in dialogue with God who acts in transforming ways. It is a remarkable combination of honesty and dialogue. Frequently, we are honest but unable to be dialogic, or, conversely, we are politely dialogic but unable to be honest. Laments in Israel are both. Precisely this combination resulted in joy and newness, the forerunners of resurrection faith.<sup>viii</sup>

I think that Brueggemann's discussion on having honest dialogue with God speaks of an experience too few Christians have today. If really taken to heart and put into practice, it is something that could help transform the lives of so many people. This has not only helped me already in my prayer life, but I have read this section to a few people and will continue to talk to others about the necessity of honest interaction with God.

Also helpful was hearing Professor Tom Parker talk about his own personal experiences of honesty in our classroom discussions<sup>ix</sup>. In class we talked about some of the following ideas related to honesty with God and with ourselves. Just as we are related to our family members, so we are God's children and closely related to him. It is not always healthy to feel that we need to act a certain way and hold our life together as we interact with God. God is big enough to handle my anger. When I have a disagreement with my wife, I would rather argue with her than for us each to give each other the 'cold shoulder'

and not interact at all. The interaction, intense as it may be, shows that there is care and relationship there. If we didn't care about each other, we would not take the time or effort to have intellectually challenging and emotionally tiring interactions. Also, we should not force people to 'get over' their emotional pain and turmoil too quickly. It is not healthy for us to deny the feelings and hurts that we have as a normal part of human life. If we force ourselves into a mode of acting like good Christians but not dealing with the real issues as we see them and feel them, then we may experience emotional instability and other mental problems. The healthiest thing for us is to be honest with ourselves, with God, and with others about things in our lives. We don't 'play games' and 'put on a happy face' when we are hurt, we instead need to tell God about it and allow him to heal us. He can't heal us if we are denying the fact that we have been hurt and have a problem.

#### PRAISE

The other type of psalm that I want to talk about are Psalms of praise. It is appropriate to talk about praise last since the book of Psalms itself ends with praise.

As 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup>) century Americans, most of us tend to be fairly pragmatic and results-oriented. If we don't see a practical use for doing something, then we won't take time out of a busy schedule to do it. In our culture today, life tends to be narrowed down to only the essential or 'profitable' activities. (Even in recreation or entertainment we tend to see practical value of relaxing, taking a break, or being rejuvenated so that we can then get back to being 'productive'.) Then we talk about psalms of praise! Of what value is praise? At a certain point in my life, I somewhat despised the activity of praise; I didn't really seem to 'get that much out of it'. As I have gone on in life, I now enjoy singing praises and worshipping the Lord.



In our reading and class discussion, we talked about this very matter that praise is not a ‘pragmatic’ act, but an act of loving, admiring, and worshipping our Beloved Lord. Brueggemann calls it a ‘useless act’ that aims at, leads to, and intends nothing, but is an end in itself. This is better understood when he says concerning praise that

it belongs to this relation with this sovereign governor who gives to us far more abundantly than we ask or think, .... Praise is simply an act of communion that has no purpose other than engagement in this right relation. It is an act of extravagant homecoming when ‘we come down where we ought to be’. That is all and that is enough.”<sup>x</sup>

It was a great discovery to find that the Psalms end in praise. I had never really taken notice of the five different ‘books’ in the Book of Psalms. I knew they existed, but didn’t know of any kind of distinction as to the material in each one. While reading through the Psalms over the course of the last couple months, I found it a joy and refreshment when I got to Book IV, Psalm 90 and following. In the earlier books there was interspersed praise, but most of the Psalms seemed to be general prayers, complaints, crying to the Lord, asking for revenge from enemies and things of that nature. But with Psalm 90, the general tone seemed to change; there seemed to be more prayer and praise; I felt inwardly refreshed.

I truly enjoyed Eugene Peterson’s discussion on the ‘End’ of the Book of Psalms. Here is what he says about the conclusions of each of the five Books found in the Psalms and how they conclude in Psalm 150:

The first four benedictions work variations on a common theme with the words “Blessing” and “Amen” holding key positions. ... When the time comes to provide a conclusion of the fifth book, the Blessing and the Amen, wonderful and powerful as they are, are dropped in order to bring the Hallelujah front and center as the controlling word. Psalm 150 begins and ends with Hallelujah, but also uses it internally. These hallelujahs are cannonades: thirteen times this strongest of all Hebrew praise words thunders across the earth reverberating the eucharistic end of prayer.

There is more. Psalm 150 does not stand alone; four more hallelujah psalms are inserted in front of it so that it becomes the fifth of five psalms that conclude the Psalter – five hallelujah psalms, one for each “book” of the Psalms, and the last, the 150<sup>th</sup> doing double duty as the conclusion to both the fifth book and to the five books all together.<sup>xi</sup>

After such a conclusion to the Book of Psalms, how can I not be convinced of the importance and power in praise? The Psalms surely instruct us in the most important way; they lead us into this relationship with a God who wants us to interact with him honestly in all our circumstances. Ultimately our lives will end up praising him, because in doing so we stay in that right relation to our Maker and heavenly Father.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, “Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer,” (San Francisco: 1<sup>st</sup> Harper Collins Paperback Ed) 1991.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>iv</sup> Tremper Longman III, “How to Read the Psalms,” (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 1988, p. 46.

<sup>v</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Psalms and the Life of Faith,” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1995, p. 67.

<sup>vi</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms,” (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1993, p. 92.

<sup>vii</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>ix</sup> Tom Parker, Classroom discussion for OT526X – Psalms, (Fuller Theological Seminary, Phoenix Extension), March 29, 2001.

<sup>x</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>xi</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, Ibid., p. 126-127.