

Worship at Home
Praying along the way Jesus sends us
August 16, 2020

Call to worship: Psalm 124:8

Prayers of praise, confession, and supplication:

Great are you Lord,
and greatly to be praised.
You uphold those who are falling,
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.
You hear our cry
and our near to all who call on you in truth.
All your works give thanks to you,
the earth, the sea, the sky,
they speak of the glory of your kingdom.
And so, Father Son, and Holy Spirit,
ever one and ever living God,
we extol you,
and praise your name forever and ever. (Psalm 145)

Lord, you were favourable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
Will you not revive us again?

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,
and grant us your salvation. (Psalm 85)

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you. (Psalm 67)
Amen.

Assurance:

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

To all who turn to Jesus Christ in faith and repentance, I say to you:
Your sin is forgiven.
Accept God's pardon,
and be at peace.

Hymn: #65 "All people that on earth do dwell"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRYsdJOEMYc>

God's Word read and interpreted:

Be mindful of the margins

It might seem too obvious to mention, but I think it bears repeating and repeating often.

The foundation of a disciple's life is faith in the goodness of God.

There is an ancient creedal formula that sums up this basic belief. From Psalm 145:

The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

God is good. And God's ways are good.

This foundational belief provides the raw material from which Psalm 67 is sculpted.

READ PSALM 67.

The goal of this series of sermons is to use the prayer book which God has given to us in what the Book of the Psalms to learn not just what to pray but how to pray.

I've mentioned before that a critical element in this exercise is to so engage with the psalms that the words become true expressions of your own sentiments. Worshiping in truth means that the words we say truly represent our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. To that end, when we read the psalms, we need to pause and consider not only what the original composer meant, but what *we* mean when we recite these ancient words.

We've also discussed the biblical practice of meditation. This is when we become so familiar with a passage that we can mumble it repeatedly throughout the day as we think about the connections it might have to our own lives.

A third element of praying the psalms is to be mindful of the margins.

Many of the psalms have an italicized line or two that precedes the first verse. In the Hebrew Psalter, these italicized notes are actually considered as the first verse of the psalm. These headings tell us the identity of the psalm's composer, the original audience/performers, and some directions as to how the prayer is to be sung and even what ancient (and long forgotten) tune is to be used.

From the heading margin of Psalm 67 we learn that the psalm was originally intended to be sung in a group with a choir leader and the singing was to be accompanied by stringed instruments.

There is another marginal note that appears 71 times in the Book of the Psalms. The only other place it appears in scripture is thrice in the prophet Habakkuk. That word is *Selah*.

Selah has never been translated into English because the pure meaning of the word has been lost to time. However, through generations of worshipers praying, singing, memorizing, and studying the psalms, the community that has been formed by these prayers has been able to infer the intent of this 5-letter word even if we cannot find a direct English counterpart.

Selah is a musical direction. Because it is a marginal note (something which a choir director would have written in his score as he was rehearsing for worship) and because the verse divisions and punctuation we have in our Bible didn't exist in the original Hebrew versions of the psalms, *selah* is not always precisely placed beside specific verses. Nevertheless, it usually appears near verses of profound significance or in the midst of a section of the psalm which bears greater emphasis.

The intention of *selah* is to change the intensity of the music. This change creates the space needed so that the singers and worshipers have an opportunity to reflect on what they are singing. Not unlike when an organist modulates to a higher key before the last verse of a hymn or when a contemporary bridge is added between the verses of a traditional hymn.

How often have you found yourself singing a hymn and realizing that you don't actually know what you are singing? It happens often. I used to lead a service of carols during the Christmas season in which I would lead the congregation in speaking the Christmas carol as one would a poem before we sang it. Invariably, many of the attendees would tell me afterwards that they had never actually heard the words of "Silent Night" or "O Come, all ye Faithful!"

Whether it was by modulating the key, adding more voices, or by inserting an instrumental interlude, the intent of *selah* is to provide an opportunity for worshipers to be mindful of what they are singing. Not merely to recite ancient words, but to digest

them, to give the neural networks time to process what has been said and maybe be transformed as a result.

In Psalm 67 *selah* appears twice; once after verse 1, and again after verse 4.

Verse 1 likely sounds familiar. It's an adaptation of the Aaronic blessing which, in its entirety is recorded in Numbers 6. The community, gathered in song, boldly prays for divine blessing.

This very simple prayer (which is easy to memorize and thus to become part of your vocabulary of prayer) bears witness to both our foundational belief that God is good and to our experiential knowledge that we stand in need of help. We not only need God's provision and protection, we need God's love. We need God's mercy and God's grace. We need the relationship with the One who has created us and who redeems us through the blood shed on the cross.

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us." This evokes the image of someone turning their head to look at us. It's of a person of grace turning towards us, inviting us into a life-giving relationship with himself.

This relationship with the Creator is what Jesus came to moderate. He came to reveal for those who can see with the eyes of faith the gracious and just Father of all that exists.

Resting in the space following this simple prayer, we acknowledge our need and we boldly pray that God would bless the community. Yet, the way Jesus sends us is the way that allows others to also experience God's blessings. Hence the prayer builds to the second *selah* which demarcates verse 4.

Verse 4 is the only 3-line verse in a prayer of 2-line verses. And it is the only verse that stands alone. Notice: verse 1 is paralleled by verse 7, verse 2 is answered by verse 6, and verse 3 is exactly duplicated in verse 5. Verse 4 stands alone. It is the pinnacle of the prayer. This is where the worshiper's imagination is meant to focus and rest. God is good. God's ways are good. And hope – for all people, for all nations, for all of creation – depends on God's grace and rests in the knowledge of his presence, providence, justice, and blessing.

It is unlikely that you have access to a private choir when you are reading the psalms at your kitchen table or beside your bonfire at home. You probably don't have the luxury of a worship leader directing musicians to help you more fully engage with the song! Nevertheless, *selah* is still an important direction for us to notice as we learn to pray along the way Jesus sends us.

By that 5-letter word, our heavenly intercessor moves teaches us to be mindful.

Selah is an opportunity to be mindful of God's goodness: God's grace, guidance, and justice. And it's an opportunity to be mindful of the way our Lord would have us walk through our days: that through our actions and words, all the nations would know God's saving power; that through our thoughts and our behaviours, all the peoples would know and praise the God who judges with equity and guides His people along the way. Amen.

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

Living God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
so many people have reached out to you in times of desperation with so many different needs.

You had compassion for them all.

We thank you that you are not a God who remains far off,
but that you hear the cries of your people.

Lord Jesus, we know both struggle and joy in our lives, too.
This day we set before you our many different hopes and concerns.
Fill us with your compassion as we pray.

For all that we are and all that we do, all we wish we could do and all we long for...
Selah.

We pray for everything we work for in our church and community, and everything we hope for in the face of so much change...
Selah.

We pray for the choices we face in our country and community, in our homes and workplaces, and for all the responsibilities we bear in our different roles...
Selah.

We pray for the troubles that weary us, the situations that puzzle us and the uncertainty that surrounds us...
Selah.

We remember before you each situation that worries us and each person we care about...
Selah.

Living Christ, you are the Source of peace and new possibility for us all.
Help us trust in your grace for today and tomorrow. Fill us with the strength and hope we need to walk with you, united in your love.

For it is as your loyal followers we dare to pray the words you taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: #39 "God of mercy, God of grace"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJZirc3w7VQ>

Benediction:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that God's way may be known upon earth,
God's saving power among all nations.
Amen.