

Worship at home

August 23, 2020

Praying along the Way Jesus sends us – Part 4
Psalm 137 and Psalm 138

Call to worship: Psalm 124:8

Prayer of praise and confession:

Eternal God,
you are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow,
and yet you come to us afresh each new day.
You breathe new life into what has grown tired and discouraged.
You offer healing for what is broken and worn.
You restore hope for what seems impossible.
You are the source of life and love for us and all your creatures,
And so, we worship you Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit,
one God, now and always. Amen.

Merciful God, we confess that we have strayed from your purposes.
You set a path for us to follow, but we conform to the ways of this world.
You offer us your transforming love, but we cling to familiar patterns and habits.
You give each of us gifts to use for the work of your kingdom,
but we wait for others to do what needs doing.
Forgive us for failing to serve you with eager hearts. Amen.

Assurance:

Though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly.
God will fulfill his purposes in creation and in redemption.
His steadfast love endures forever.
To all who turn to Jesus Christ in faith and in repentance,
it is my privilege to say to you: Your sin is forgiven.
For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him, would not
perish but would have everlasting life.
Believe the Gospel.
Accept God's pardon.
And be at peace.

Prayers of thanksgiving:

O Lord, we give you thanks with our words, with our thoughts, and with our actions.
When we called to you, you answered us.
By the blood you shed on the cross you have reclaimed us as your own.
By your Spirit speaking to our souls through the words of Scripture,
you teach us to be your people in our situations, and you give us the strength to endure.
You work within all circumstances to bring your good will to bear on the world you love.
Accept our praise as our sacrifice of thanksgiving,
in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Hymn: #411 “Stand up and bless the Lord”

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

Scripture and Sermon:

Organization matters

Throughout this series, we’ve been seeking to learn to pray the way Jesus sends us. I’ve tried to highlight some ways by which we can so engage with the psalms, which make up the prayer book God has given to us in Scripture, that our prayers – the language we use, the things about which we pray, the reasons for our prayers – become conformed to the devotion which God has ordained. This is one of the reasons we pray with the psalms: to learn how God would have us pray.

We’ve seen the value of asking questions as you read, and then waiting, praying, and thinking until you get an answer.

I’ve mentioned the biblical understanding of meditation: memorize and mumble while thinking through possible connections with your situation.

And we’ve seen the importance of paying attention to the marginal notes in the Book of the Psalms. Particularly the placement of *selah*.

Today I want to be mindful of how the psalter is organized. What can we learn about how to pray by observing where particular psalms are placed and by which prayers they are surrounded?

This exercise doesn’t necessarily apply equally to every one of the 150 psalms. Yet, by being cognizant of the fact that the psalter is not a random collection of poetry but a carefully organized manual, we can notice that for some of the psalms, their physical placement teaches us something about praying as God has ordained.

To that end, our first prayer for today is Psalm 138.

READ PSALM 138.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Psalm 138 is a prayer of thanksgiving. And it can stand alone. However, if we pay attention to the prayers that surround it, we can gain some profound insight into how to pray the way Jesus sends us.

Psalm 138 is placed immediately after one of the most challenging prayers in our prayer book. Psalm 137, to which we'll return in September, was composed during or soon after the Babylonian exile. The Israelites had been invaded, conquered, and forcefully removed from the Promised Land. Psalm 137 strongly evokes feelings of despair and retaliatory anger the Israelites felt toward their captors.

READ PSALM 137.

This too is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

While it might seem at first to be an inexpressible thought, it's not unimaginable. When one considers the context in which the psalm was composed and sung, and when we consider how bitter we humans can become when we feel we've been wronged, the sentiment, while it might be hyperbole (or it might not), is not unfathomable.

And yet, the very next prayer (as well as, incidentally, the preceding prayer, Psalm 136) evokes a dramatic change of mood.

Psalm 138 is filled with gratitude, trust, and hope.

Psalm 138 serves as a faith-filled answer to the questions and the despair of Psalm 137.

In the midst of their exile, the Israelites raised their voices to ask: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

And, from the depths of communal memory, they heard David's reply:

*I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;
Before the gods I sing your praise.*

From their place of struggle, the worshiper bows toward what was once the glorious temple in Jerusalem and they remember that the living God is not confined to a temple which can be torn down stone by stone. God's name and his word; his love and his faithfulness cannot be crushed by the enemy's wrath.

The triune God we worship and with whom we are reconciled by the grace of Jesus Christ is far greater than anything we can imagine. His love, faithfulness, and strength are not diminished by our human struggles. And yet, "though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; ... Though *I* walk in the midst of trouble, *you* [O Lord] preserve me; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me." Even in Babylon, even when they felt that God had been rendered impotent, even when they thought that God was too far removed from their situation to

be of any real help, the psalm reminds them that God is not powerless and that God is not indifferent to their struggles.

And so, the people shaped by these prayers choose to give thanks.

When you choose to give thanks to God, your patterns of thought begin to change. Giving thanks to the living God transforms the worshiper's soul.

If, when you have so chosen, you want your thanksgiving and thus your worship to be truthful, you need to go beyond repeating someone else's prayer. You have to think through what it is for which you are thankful. As you learn to process experiences in gratitude you begin to operate less out of the baser, retaliatory reactions and more out of reasoned and gospel-oriented responses.

Jesus sacrificed his perfect relationship with the Father to walk with human beings in the full grit of our reality. He sacrificed his life on the cross to forgive our sin. He lives, resurrected and ascended at the heavenly altar where he continues to intercede on our behalf until he returns to unite once and for all heaven and earth at the Resurrection.

No matter what you may be enduring, you are not alone in Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

Psalm 137 may well be an honest expression of what the Israelites were feeling in the moment. But Psalm 138 provides a God-honouring, faith-informed, and mature response to our troubles.

By being mindful of the surrounding prayers, we learn that choosing to offer prayers of thanksgiving, whatever our situation, is one way by which the People of God sing the Lord's song even in a foreign land.

To God be the glory, now and forever.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession and supplication:

Life-giving God, you equip your people with gifts to work for your kingdom, bringing justice and peace to every land and community.

Through your Spirit, O God, you give the gift of prophecy. Help us to use this gift to speak words of justice and truth into situations where people are exploited or treated unfairly. Guide our actions so that we might influence change for good in the world, and bring hope to the hopeless.

You give the gift of serving, O God, in the example of your Son Jesus. Help us to use this gift to serve those who have been cast aside by structures of power and privilege. Increase our awareness of injustice and our dedication to work with those who suffer its effects. May the abundance we share in our country touch every life and community in this land.

God of wisdom, you give the gift of teaching. Help us to use this gift to ensure that every child has access to education and opportunity. Be with every teacher and every student in the coming months as schools adapt to the challenges of COVID-19. Support creative teaching and diligent learning in every school and centre for learning.

God of hope, you give the gift of encouragement. Help us to use this gift to hearten all who are struggling in these difficult days. Bless us with words and actions to bring comfort to all who mourn, to those coping with mental or physical illness, and to any who feel isolated or left behind.

God of purpose and promise, you give the gift of leadership. Help us to use this skill to build up our communities and model respectful ways of living and loving. Show us how our churches can be places of support within our neighbourhoods.

God of love, you give the gift of kindness. Help us be kind to all who cross our paths, even those who anger or upset us. Teach us to be forgiving and reconciling in all our relationships. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn #411 "Now thank we all our God"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0dmfmwFLn0>

Benediction:

May the Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

Amen.