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Reading and Praying the Psalms: Thoughts and Resources

Additional guidance and encouragement for reading through Psalms

Greg Strand (/blog/authors/greg-strand) | April 3, 2020



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During this month of [reading through the Psalms](https://www.efca.org/blog/reading-and-praying-psalms), I thought it might be an encouragement to fellow pilgrims to provide a few additional resources.

A few fellow believers

“There is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise.”

— John Calvin

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In the providence of God, many other believers throughout history have found great comfort and encouragement from reading and praying the Psalms. Here are a few of those believers:

- **Athanasius:** “The other Scriptures speak to us, but the Psalms speak for us.”
- **Martin Luther:** The Psalms are “a little Bible...[they] set out in briefest and most beautiful form, all that is to be found in the Bible.”
- **John Calvin:** It is worthwhile to consider a few more lengthy comments from Calvin, which are contained in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms. Regarding the uniqueness of the Psalms in the whole of the Scriptures, he writes:

"There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise."

In addition to focusing on God and his promises, the Psalms are also mirror reflections of the soul.

"I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, *An Anatomy of the Soul*; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandment which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves seeing they are exhibited to us speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy. In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine."

- **Ben Patterson:** "By praying the Psalms back to God, we learn to pray in tune with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...The Psalms are *God's* prayer book, and they teach us to talk to God in his own language."

A few additional resources

There are many invaluable resources to aid in one's reading and study of the Psalms. It is important to remember these are supplemental, not primary. The primary is the text of Scripture, the actual Psalms inspired by God.

Here are a few additional devotional resources (I did not include commentaries) that you may find helpful to accompany your reading of the Psalms:

“I’ve learned that I have to read [the Psalms] as a Christian if they are going to shape me as a Christian.”

— Tim Keller

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- Christopher Ash, *Psalms for You: How to Pray, How to Feel and How to Sing* (<https://www.amazon.com/Psalms-You-pray-feel-sing-ebook/dp/B082W9XD45>) (God's Word for You) (<https://www.amazon.com/Psalms-You-pray-feel-sing-ebook/dp/B082W9XD45>).
- W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms* (<https://www.gracebooksonline.com/products/learning-to-love-the-psalms-1>).
- Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms* (<https://www.amazon.com/Songs-Jesus-Daily-Devotions-Psalms-ebook/dp/B00Y9HIN50>).
- Alex Motyer, *Psalms by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* (<http://amazon.com/Psalms-Day-New-Devotional-Translation/dp/1781917167>).
- Alec Motyer and Carine MacKenzie, and Catherine Noel (illustrator), *Psalms for My Day: A Child's Praise Devotional* (https://www.amazon.com/Psalms-My-Day-Childs-Devotional/dp/1527101819/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Psalms+for+My+Day%3A+A+Child%27s+Praise+Devotional&qid=152).

 - *Psalms for My Day* is taken from Motyer’s *Psalms by the Day* and adapted for children.

- Ben Patterson, *God’s Prayer Book: The Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms* (<https://www.amazon.com/Gods-Prayer-Book-Pleasure-Praying-ebook/dp/B00FEOE1IE>).

A few additional thoughts

After Keller published *The Songs of Jesus*, he was asked (<https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/176965-tony-reinke-questions-on-prayer-with-tim-keller.html>) how reading through the Psalms every month shaped his thinking and his praying. He noted:

"Just reading all the Psalms every month all the way through, and then praying after reading a psalm, changes your vocabulary, your language, your attitude. On the one hand, the Psalms actually show you that you can be unhappy in God's presence. The Psalms, in a sense, give you the permission to pour out your complaints in a way that we might think inappropriate, if it wasn't there in the Scriptures. But on the other hand, the Psalms demand that you bow in the end to the sovereignty of God in a way that modern culture wouldn't lead you to believe."

In another interview (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-tim-keller-read-every-month-20-years/>), Keller was asked about how his discipline of reading through the Psalms formed and shaped him as a Christian and as a pastor. He highlighted the following:

"First, I've learned that I have to read them as a Christian if they are going to shape me as a Christian. That is, I need to see Christ in the Psalms, as he did himself. Jesus saw himself as the priest-king of Psalm 110, as the cornerstone of Psalm 118, and as the sufferer of Psalm 22. If I am to follow my Lord, I must see him in the Psalms. When I do that, the Psalms teach me to do the things the psalmists do: (1) commit myself to God; (2) depend on God; (3) seek solace in God; (4) find mercy and grace in God; and (5) get perspective and wisdom from God—all through Jesus Christ. Finally, the Psalms give me as a pastor a "medicine chest" to help people do all these things, too. I don't have to only exhort others to seek God in their situation. I can find that situation represented in the Psalter and then read (and pray) the psalm with them, which shows them how to live before God in their condition."

The Psalms were written by and to faithful Israelites, the people of God. However, they find their ultimate fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Matt 5:17-20; Luke 24:25-27, 44). This is what Keller addresses above. The Psalms are to be read as a Christian. In other words, the Psalms are not an end in themselves as part of the Old Testament canon. There is a Christo-promise/Christo-centric/Christo-telic focus and end to which they point and a Son in whom they find fulfillment. Because of this, all the Psalms are Messianic and understood in this way means the Psalms are also the Christian's prayer, song and life book. Here is my attempt to emphasize the importance of the Psalms.

- I am thankful the Lord Jesus read, prayed, and sang these Psalms as a faithful Jew.
- I am thankful that Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilled these Psalms as a faithful Jewish Son.
- I am thankful that as a faithful follower of the Son we can read, pray and sing these Psalms through the Lord Jesus Christ.
- I am thankful that through the Lord Jesus Christ, we can read, pray and sing these Psalms with others.

A few guides to prayer

As a final thought. When you read the Psalms, learn to pray them as well. In a simple yet helpful way, Ben Patterson, in *God's Prayer Book*, asks three questions of each Psalm. These questions then serve as a basis for his prayerful response. He writes, "A simple way to understand a psalm's intent is to read it through the lens of the 'three Rs': Rejoice, Repent, and Request. Ask these three questions:

- **Rejoice:** What do I find here that gives me cause to rejoice, to give praise and thanks? Then do it.
- **Repent:** What do I read here that brings to light sin in my life? Then confess and repent.
- **Request:** What in this psalm can inform the way I pray for others and myself? Then make your requests of God accordingly.

May the Lord use this month in the Psalms in great ways: to deepen our understanding of God and his promises, to give expression to the thoughts and reflections of our soul, to grow our faith and trust in the Lord, to glean a vocabulary to think and speak about God, to conform us into the likeness of the Son, who read, prayed and fulfilled these Psalms, which gives us the confidence to approach the throne by grace (Heb 4:14-16).



Greg Strand (</blog/authors/greg-strand>)

EFCA

Greg Strand is EFCA executive director of theology and credentialing, and he serves on the Board of Ministerial Standing as well as the Spiritual Heritage Committee. He and his family are members of Northfield (Minnesota) EFC.

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