

Grounding Ourselves in the Goodness of God

Series: Songs of Summer: Worship Through the Book of Psalms

Brad Bailey – July 12, 2015

Intro

Last night one of my sons returned from a concert...and was sharing all about the show...the music...the artist...what was behind the songs...why he liked it...how he related to it. Songs have that power. In their poetry and melody. They can connect to something in our human nature like nothing else...they can relate to our condition...our feelings.

This is why people refer to music as the soundtracks to life...perhaps you have a soundtrack to a season of your past...songs that capture and convey it. Or today we speak more about playlists.

A play list is something compiled which one finds can serve their listening desires well...most often for a certain part of life. In the days of cassette recordings...people made tapes of the songs they wanted to play on a trip or to share with a special person. Playlist have become even more popular in the digital age.

Some make playlists for the gym...some for a trip...some for the mood of a season. They help them connect to a part of life.

The Psalms serve as a **Playlist for Life...a soundtrack for the soul.**

The Psalms bear the breadth of human circumstances...and in this sense they are a soundtrack for the soul...a playlist for life.

Today we begin a new series...a new focus...entitled “**Songs of Summer: Worship Through the Book of Psalms**”

The Psalms.... Which refers to a book of many psalms...in the middle of the Bible Have been a living call to the human soul...in all it's circumstances and dispositions...to engage the living God.

For those less familiar with the Psalms, let me share a little background about WHAT the Psalms are. [1]

The book of Psalms...

- **Contains 150 independent compositions...**which are poetic engagement with God... “prayers”... that were also set to music... “a double art form.”
- **By a number of authors (73 by David who served as the King...others to Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon)**
- **Written over a long period...**likely one as early as the time of Moses...but most during the period in which the people had entered the promised land of Israel,...but then been attacked and taken into exile.

And as such, is that...

- **Which captures and carries a poetic record of the ups and downs of personal and national experience...and as such, is able to serve and shape communal worship**

They served as a **communal expressions of worship**... a **hymnal that held the people together** in relationship to God.

The Psalms capture the soul, engaging the living God, in the breadth of human experience and feelings. As one author described....

“It is not that every sentiment expressed by a psalmist is admirable, but that in praying the Psalms, we confront ourselves as we really are. The Psalms are a reality check to keep prayer from becoming sentimental, superficial, or detached from the real world.”

— Richard H. Schmidt

Many express how much they appreciate the testimonies. > In hearing the way others have experienced God, we find **common process** and can gain insight and inspiration...

> It's with that dynamic of gaining **insight & inspiration** that this morning we begin a series from the Book of Psalms.

In particular, we come to the Psalms to learn what it means **to have our souls centered in God.** Psalms provide a **testimony** and **inspiration** for **centering one's soul in God.**

As one summarized [2]

“At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction that the gravitational center of life (of right human understanding, trust, hope, service, morality, adoration), **but also of history** and of the **whole creation** (heaven and earth), **is God.**”

“We understand the psalms best when we “stand under” them and allow them to flow over us like a rain shower. **We may turn to Psalms looking for something, but sooner or later we will meet Someone.** As we read and memorize the psalms, we will gradually discover how much they are already part of us. They put into words our deepest hurts, longings, thoughts, and prayers. They gently push us toward being what God designed us to be—people loving and living for him.” (From Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation)

It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus, who lived the ultimate life centered in God... quoted the Psalms often... showing **they had been a central part of his life.**

Using Psalm 116 as an example, I believe the Lord can **speak to our spiritual lives this morning.**

Let's read this Psalm together... I will read the odd numbered verses...and you can follow with the even numbered verses.

Psalm 116:1-19 [NIV]

I love the Lord, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.

[2] Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.

[3] The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
[4] Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"O Lord, save me!"

[5] The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
[6] The Lord protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.

[7] Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.

[8] For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,
[9] that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living.
[10] I believed; therefore I said,
"I am greatly afflicted."
[11] And in my dismay I said,
"All men are liars."

[12] How can I repay the Lord
for all his goodness to me?
[13] I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
[14] I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.
...[19] in the courts of the house of the Lord--
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the Lord.

This Psalm... begins with those moving words **"I love the Lord."**

Those are the words many of us have declared... and sung...but may often feel are hard to grasp at times. They reflect **a passion** we **may sing** more than we **sense**.

Yet this kind of love is what Jesus said was to be the priority of life... the greatest command.

What gives the Psalmist his passion with God ?... what allows such a **vibrancy** in his life with God?

I want to share **FOUR qualities** which I find **throughout the Psalms** which I believe are **KEYS to a passionate spiritual life** and a vibrant with God.

The Psalms provide an inspired model of spirituality which includes...

1. Freedom to relate honestly with God (vv. 3-4, 10-11)

[3] The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.

[4] Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"O Lord, save me!"

The Psalmist had no trouble expressing his **problems** and **pain** to God.

Here he simply expresses his **deep fears**...

Just a part of what we find.... Elsewhere he expresses his **deep doubts**.... cries for **justice**.... feelings of **abandonment** ("Why are you silent..?")

At times the Psalmist can **almost offend our sense of reverence**.

> **But God welcomes an honest heart. David is referred to as a man after God's own heart... and he declares such things. He calls us to...**

- "Come, let us contend together"

- "Cast all your cares upon him"

> **Because it's the core of true RELATIONSHIP. It's what keeps one's passion for God alive.**

Walter Brueggemann writes [3]....

"Note that the Psalms thus propose to speak about human experience in an honest, freeing way. This is in contrast to much human speech and conduct which is in fact a cover-up. In most arenas where people live, we are expected and required to speak the language of safe orientation and equilibrium, either to find it so or to pretend we find it so. For normal, conventional functioning of public life, the raw edges of disorientation and reorientation must be denied or suppressed for purposes of public equilibrium. As a result, our speech is dulled and mundane. Our passion has been stilled and is without imagination."

God doesn't want the outward show of religion that doesn't reflect genuine relationship.

This is precisely what Jesus confront. In the book of Matthew we see that His anger erupted: "Hypocrites! It was you Isaiah meant when he prophesied: **This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless**" (15:7-9).

Brennan Manning, says [4]...

"In the Pharisee is the false religious face. In contrast, Jesus lifts up the child which represents the true self... without pretensions. The child represents my authentic self and the Pharisee the unauthentic.

The inner child is aware of his feelings and uninhibited in their expression; the Pharisee edits feelings and makes a stereotyped response to life situations.

My children ask all sorts of question... including the infamous "Why"

The child spontaneously expresses emotions; the Pharisee carefully represses them. The question is **not whether I am an introvert or an extrovert**, a sanguine or a subdued personality. The issue is **whether I express or repress my genuine feelings.**

John Powell once said with sadness that as an epitaph for his parents' tombstone he would have been compelled to write: "Here lie two people who never knew one another." It is that dynamic that so easily arises in marriage.... In which one may say..."We never talk anymore." It never means words aren't spoken. It means there is not real sharing of selves.

> The same can be true of our relationship with God. God may want to say to some of us today. "We don't talk anymore."

To ignore, repress, or dismiss our feelings is to fail to listen to the stirrings of the Spirit within our emotional life.

The cry of a child won't always receive what they want... they aren't the parent.

> In the same way, reverence is not reflected in repressing our feelings, but in both expressing and submitting them to God.

Perhaps many of us have tried to bury our issues with God... and with it, buried our passion... our love.

Now...for some...such honesty becomes an end in itself... a place of despair... we declare what we feel to be the ultimate reality...and our freedom to live accordingly.
But the Psalmist transcends such presumption.

2. The necessity of directing one's soul (v. 7)

**[7] Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.**

One of the qualities we find in the Psalms is the **art of counseling one's soul.**

The Psalmist understands our soul's need guiding.

Our souls are our inner disposition....they begin with certain thoughts... conscious or unconscious... and feed how we feel. It is this inner dialogue in which we choose our focus... what matters, what's at hand, etc.

The disposition of our souls is vulnerable... as we all know our souls can get lost looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places... lost in feelings that will misguide us.

The truth is **we all talk to ourselves...often... the issue is what we talk about.**

> The Psalmist simply models counseling his souls about the truth of God.

Examples are found throughout the Psalms... especially by King David.

Psalm 103:1-2 (Of David)

**Praise the Lord, O my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits--**

Goes on to rehearse all God does in his love for him / us.

The Psalms understand what we should all hold onto...the reality that we are finite. What we feel comes from seeing only a small part of what is actually at hand.

The Psalmist realizes this. Listen to what David writes in Psalm 73....

Psalm 73:1-5 (NIV)

¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵ They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.

He realizes he is slipping....and needs to change his focus.
It's interesting that what then is described is often an exaggerated perception.
Do those he deems wicked really have no struggles... are they really free from the burdens common to man? Of course not....but isn't that what happens when envy takes hold of us?

That is why redirecting the soul's focus is not a matter of repression....but of restoration.

Redirecting the soul is not repressing it...but re-centering it in the larger reality.
It is drawing back into the gravitational pull of God which bears life.
It is not ignoring reality but expanding reality.

As one describes... "The psalms do not simply *express* emotions: when sung in faith, they actually *shape* the emotions of the godly." (C. John Collins)

3. The integrating of both personal and communal life with God (vv. 18-19)

The Psalms capture how true spiritual vitality involves that which is both **deeply personal**...and **dynamically public**...communal.

They are raw with personal honesty as we noted.

"Whenever I read the psalms, I feel like I am eavesdropping on a saint having a personal conversation with God." — R.C. Sproul

But they never conceive of being ultimately private...because ultimately worship is always that which is joined and united.

**[14] I will fulfill my vows to the Lord
in the presence of all his people.**

**[19] in the courts of the house of the Lord--
in your midst, O Jerusalem.**

Today... there's a tendency to have our spirituality become either too personal or too public.

If too public, it loses genuineness... if too personal, it's cut off from the roots that give life.

We have often recognized this when we consider the nature of baptism. Baptism captures the unique power of public expression. I've noted that I see this in the nature of marriage as well. A wedding is no substitute for personal vows...but personal vows are no substitute for declaring such a choice to the community we will live life with.

Life with God isn't simply our own.

Finally...

4. Recognizes the ultimate goodness of God. (vv. 5-7, 12)

[5] The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.

[6] The Lord **protects** the simple hearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.

[7] Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the Lord has been good to you.

The Psalmist is affirming the fundamental goodness of God. [5]

This affirmation of the character of God is the reason for his thanksgiving, as the Lord is reliable and faithful.

The goodness of God is at the center of the Psalms as it's central to the Psalmists soul.

Consider...

Psalm 34:8

**Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.**

Psalm 118:1

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Psalm 119:68

**You are good, and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees.**

Here lies the power of the Psalms.... Honesty that can still see the ultimate truth of who God is.

It will not let it's soul sink into repression (false self), nor rebellion, by forming a case to justify itself from God and keeping at a safe distance. Rather it is the humility that roots life back into the basic reality. The humility that rescues us from the rather bizarre position that we actually are the center of life.

It rescues us to live out of the reality that we are finite creatures who stand before an infinite Creator.

We have become so enamored with ourselves that we have lost something so fundamental to life. We have begun to think we actually are the masters of reality.

We think we can find the great center of life within ourselves...and we may begin to peel away ...and start to wonder...fearing that if we keep peeling we may find nothing. But our goodness is derived from another...and He is the center to look to.

It would be like me stating that the moonlight is so amazing...it keeps us from utter darkness...so let's go to the moon and find it's source. We go and begin to drill and dig...but never find any light. Because the light is the reflection of the sun.

The Psalmist calls us to become grounded in the goodness of God.

Come and contend with God... Come and counsel your soul. Come and discover that God... your God... is good.

Notes:

1. Further description of "what" the Psalms are....

The Psalms are essentially poetry set to music... More than a hundred psalms are prefixed with inscriptions that give a number of identifying particulars: directions to the musician, name of the author or instrument, the style of the music or poetry, and the subject or occasion of the psalm.

The book of Psalms contains 150 independent compositions... written by a number of authors. Seventy-three of the psalms have been attributed to David. Other authors that are named in the superscriptions are Asaph (Psalm 50; Psalm 73-83), the sons of Korah (Psalm 42-49; Psalm 84; Psalm 85; Psalm 87; Psalm 88), Solomon (Psalm 72; Psalm 127), Heman (Psalm 88), Ethan (Psalm 89), and Moses (Psalm 90).

The psalms were written over a long period, beginning with Moses (Psalm 90) and ending sometime in the period in which the Israelites were living in exile (Psalm 137).

But the golden age of psalm writing in Israel was the period of monarchy, between David's reign and the Babylonian exile. King David, who also organized the temple service (including musicians), made the psalm an integral part of Israel's worship at the temple.

2. The full quote from the NIV Study Bible, which many refer to in capturing the Psalms, is:

“At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction that the gravitational center of life (of right human understanding, trust, hope, service, morality, adoration), but also of history and of the whole creation (heaven and earth), is God. He is the Great King over all, the One to whom all things are subject. He created all things and preserves them; they are the robe of glory with which he has clothed himself. Because he ordered them, they have a well-defined and “true” identity (no chaos there). Because he maintains them, they are sustained and kept secure from disruption, confusion or annihilation. Because he alone is the sovereign God, they are governed by one hand and held in the service of one divine purpose. Under God creation is a cosmos—an orderly and systematic whole. What we distinguish as “nature” and history had for the psalmists one Lord, under whose rule all things worked together. Through the creation the Great King’s majestic glory is displayed. He is good (wise, righteous, faithful, amazingly benevolent and merciful—evoking trust), and he is great (his knowledge, thoughts and works are beyond human comprehension—evoking reverent awe). By his good and lordly rule he is shown to be the Holy One.

As the Great King by right of creation and enduring absolute sovereignty, he ultimately will not tolerate any worldly power that opposes or denies or ignores him. He will come to rule the nations so that all will be compelled to acknowledge him. This expectation is no doubt the root and broadest scope of the psalmists’ long view of the future. Because the Lord is the Great King beyond all challenge, his righteous and peaceable kingdom will come, overwhelming all opposition and purging the creation of all rebellion against his rule—such will be the ultimate outcome of history.”

3. From Walter Brueggemann’s book, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*

4. Brennen Manning, *Abba’s Child*

5. Here in Psalm 116 we have the declaration of goodness that includes common qualities which bless or life.

He is “gracious” (*hannun*) in his forgiveness and in sustaining his children (cf. 103:8; 111:4).

He is “righteous” (*saddiq*) in keeping the covenant and all the promises.

He is “full of compassion” (*merahem*; cf. Exod 34:6: *raham*) in his tenderness and understanding of the limits of his children (cf. 103:13-14).

Consider also Psalms 34, 81, 107