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“THIS IS MY STORY; THIS IS MY SONG”:  
THE SUBJECTIVE USE OF THE PSALMS  
BY CHRISTIANS TODAY

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A Thesis  
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the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Doctor of Ministry

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by  
Matthew David Searles  
May 2020

**APPROVAL SHEET**

“THIS IS MY STORY; THIS IS MY SONG”:  
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BY CHRISTIANS TODAY

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For the glory of God

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## PREFACE

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Matthew Searles

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Psalms were famously described by Luther as a “Little Bible” and have been central to the devotional and worshipping life of the church for centuries.<sup>1</sup> The Psalms are also very important from Scripture’s own perspective; they are one of the Old Testament books most quoted in the New Testament and as such are an important part of constructing a biblical theology. Thus, to understand them rightly and perhaps as importantly, to understand how to *use* them rightly, is vital for the church today.

#### **Familiarity with the Literature**

While commentaries abound on the Psalms, the question at hand is one that is not always touched on by commentaries: how should the Psalms be interpreted and *used*? When reading of David’s experience, is this to be a paradigm for Christian discipleship or not? Is this to be read as a portrait of the coming Christ or not? Are these two approaches mutually exclusive, and if not, how do they relate?

One recent approach to these questions is *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction, Andrew Shead laments the neglect of the Psalms in contemporary evangelicalism, and suggests the reason why:

One of the reasons many of us are slow to take up the Psalms is that we are not sure how to use them well. This is not simply about the creative challenge of making them a living, breathing part of our gathered worship, but the deeper hermeneutical

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew G. Shead, ed., *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church* (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2013).

challenge of reading them well as Christian Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Shead notes that the essays that follow do not all represent one unified answer to this question; there are different approaches taken by the different authors. However, the initial focus of the book is on Christological readings, and indeed the book's title taken from Psalm 45 gives a clear indication that the overall emphasis is a Christological one.

Some of the essays in *Stirred by a Noble Theme* argue for a Christological reading of the Psalms that discourages the Psalms being used *subjectively*, that is, appropriated as the words of a believer. John Woodhouse suggests that there are problems with the approach that sees the Psalms as “given to Christians for their Christian prayers and praises.”<sup>4</sup> He says that some parts of the Psalms (e.g., Pss 23:1, Ps 27:1) “can readily (and wonderfully) be turned into the words of a Christian believer.”<sup>5</sup> But he sees problems in the claims of righteousness, in the imprecations, and in the overall “self-centeredness” of the Psalms.<sup>6</sup> He concludes, “These problems suggest that regarding the Psalms as God-given prayers and praises for Christian believers to make their own may not be an adequate explanation of how these human words are to be received by Christians as God's words.”<sup>7</sup>

Woodhouse's approach is in multiple ways paradigmatic of many evangelicals today. Drawing on the work of Eaton, he sees the Psalms as primarily *Davidic* (even the ones not associated with David), and thus the Psalms should primarily be seen as on the

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<sup>3</sup> Shead, *Stirred by a Noble Theme*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> John Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms as Christian Scripture,” in Shead, *Stirred by a Noble Theme*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 49.

<sup>6</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 50.

<sup>7</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 50.

lips of Christ the king and therefore only secondarily and derivatively on the lips of believers.<sup>8</sup> He says that when reading a Psalm, we should identify, “not first of all with the ‘I’ of the Psalms, but with the people who benefit from the deliverance of the Christ.”<sup>9</sup> He concludes, “My hope is that sufficient has been said to demonstrate that reading, hearing or singing ‘The Psalms as Christian Scripture’ is more important than finding the Psalms to be relevant to the joys and sorrows of human life.”<sup>10</sup>

Bruce Waltke and James Houston’s book *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* addresses similar hermeneutical questions, but also traces them through church history. The dichotomy that Woodhouse sets out—should the Psalms be seen as words of believers, or words of the Christ?—is seen to be one that has recurred through the ages.<sup>11</sup> This historical approach is particularly helpful, as the modern Christological approach may be a reaction against the nineteenth-century liberalism that refuses to see any Messianic prophecy in the Psalms; historical awareness shows that these are not the only two options. Houston in particular explores the “plain reading of the text” of the Reformers, in contrast to the well-meant but somewhat allegorical approaches that preceded the Reformation.

In recent years there are increasing calls that the Psalms *cannot* be used in this subjective way—at least not straightforwardly—but rather should be seen as the words of Christ. Waltke, in a seminal essay on the Psalms, argued,

From a literary and historical point of view, we should understand that the human subject of the Psalms—whether it be the blessed man of Psalm 1, the one proclaiming himself the Son of God in Psalm 2, the suffering petitioner in Psalms 3-

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<sup>8</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 55-57.

<sup>9</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 57.

<sup>10</sup> Woodhouse, “Reading the Psalms,” 73.

<sup>11</sup> Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 37-79.

7, the Son of Man in Psalm 8—is Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

In the UK in recent years, Christopher Ash has been a leading figure in teaching how the Psalms are to be interpreted. Whilst he would agree that the Psalms are to be used subjectively, he wants this to be done “in Christ.” He argues that the Psalms are “supremely the songs of Jesus, that Jesus is the great singer of the psalms; it is His voice we hear praying, lamenting, teaching and praising.”<sup>13</sup> Ash borrows a metaphor from Augustine to describe how Christians may pray the psalms themselves: “As we pray the Psalms, Jesus leads us and we join in, as His choir.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to such readings, there are many devotional books that seek to help Christians today engage with the Psalms and pray the Psalms, but the theological and hermeneutical underpinning for such an endeavor is usually assumed rather than made explicit.<sup>15</sup> This means that such books alone would be insufficient to persuade someone of the validity of the straightforward subjective use of the psalms.

Donald Whitney advocates using Scripture to prompt one’s prayers; his view of the perspicuity of Scripture means that he thinks this may be done without complex discussion of hermeneutics. He suggests skimming five Psalms each day (thereby systematically reviewing the whole Psalter each month) before choosing one Psalm and praying “whatever comes to mind as you read the text.”<sup>16</sup> Yet this seems to be the very

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *The Dance between God and Humanity: Reading the Bible Today as the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms: From Text to Message*, Proclamation Trust (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017-18), 1:38. It should be noted that Ash is continuing to study the Psalms and there does seem to be some development in his view in recent years, allowing for increasing subjective use.

<sup>14</sup> Ash, *Teaching Psalms*, 1:59.

<sup>15</sup> For example, James W. Sire, *Learning to Pray through the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005); Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 33.

sort of approach that Ash is critiquing. Ash says, “Someone told me enthusiastically about a pastor who says he reads through the Psalms until a verse resonates with him; and then he dwells there for a period, until it ceases to resonate, at which point he moves on. It sounded wonderful—and yet it would be hard to find a more completely wrong approach to the Psalms!”<sup>17</sup>

Are the Psalms given to be used straightforwardly to fuel a Christian’s prayers and praises? Or should our first thought be that they are *not* words for us to use, or at least not until we have understood them on the lips of Christ?

Ash and others have mounted a significant challenge to the form of subjective use of the Psalms that is common in more devotional literature.<sup>18</sup> But these devotional books generally do not have as their goal to defend and illustrate their hermeneutical method. This thesis will therefore seek to demonstrate that there *are* good theological and hermeneutical reasons to use the Psalms in this straightforward subjective way.

### **Goal of Thesis**

This thesis seeks to show that subjective readings of the Psalms are not the same as *subjectivism*, where responsible exegesis and hermeneutics are abandoned and the Psalms can be made to mean whatever the reader wants. Rather, subjective use of the Psalms is commended by the Psalms themselves and validated by the Apostolic use of the Psalms in the New Testament.

Ash also highlights another vital aspect of understanding the Psalms: how are they to be read as Christian Scripture? Ash is right to lament Christ-less readings of the Psalms. This thesis seeks to show that seeing Christ as the singer of each Psalm is not the

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Ash, *Psalms for You* (London: Good Book, 2020), 9.

<sup>18</sup> As noted above, Ash does want Christian believers to be able to pray and sing the Psalms, as they “join the choir” of Christ. The difference is how self-conscious he wants Christians to be as they do this; how many hermeneutical steps are necessary. In contrast to the more straightforward appropriation of the words of the Psalms commended by Whitney and others, Ash first puts a “no” in place. First, he says “We can’t pray the psalms” (*Teaching Psalms*, 1:31). He then shows how they can be prayed in Christ.

only way to be thoroughly Christ-centered in our interpretation. In fact, we will see more and richer testimony to Christ by seeing the many and various ways in which the Psalms point to his person and work.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is not simply to help Christian believers understand the Psalms, but to *use* them. But, if we want to *use* and enjoy the Psalms well, we need careful work in exegesis, hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology, as well as more practical reflections. Unless we have a theological framework in place, our use of the Psalms may either be unbridled and unprincipled—or perhaps more likely in evangelical circles, may be hesitant or even non-existent, as we are so afraid of “getting it wrong.”

So, before we can begin to think about practical use of the Psalms, we must answer a number of questions. Are these words we can use subjectively? Or are they words that belong only (or primarily) on the lips of Christ? If they are not all the words of Christ, do the Psalms speak of Christ at all? If they are words for believers to use, what about the Psalms that we struggle to take on our lips, such as claims to righteousness, calls for judgment, discussion of enemies?

There is not space in this thesis to consider historical answers to this question. But we should note from the outset that seeing the Psalms as God-inspired words for us to pray has a long history. In the fourth century, Athanasius wrote to a friend about how to read the Psalms:

Within [the Psalter] are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. . . . You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on but learn the way to remedy your ill. . . . In fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *On the Incarnation*, trans. A. R. C. S. M.

It is possible for us, therefore, to find in the Psalter not only the reflection of our own soul's state . . . but also a fit form of words wherewith to please the LORD on each of life's occasions.<sup>20</sup>

### **Thesis Statement**

The Psalms are intended to be used subjectively as well as objectively. New Covenant believers are to appropriate the Psalms as their own words of prayer to God, as well as seeing them as words pointing to the Messiah. This is the pattern established in the Old Testament and confirmed by the use of the Psalms in the New Testament. This does not lead to a Christ-less interpretation but actually allows for a richer Christ-centered reading of the Psalms.

Chapters 2-3 lay a foundation by looking at the world of the Psalms, considering them as poetry and as songs.

Chapters 4-9 seek to defend the subjective use of the Psalms. First, I will consider how the Psalms present themselves and who the 'I' of the Psalms is, then I will think about how the New Testament authors encourage the subjective use of the Psalms. Subsequent chapters consider issues that might lead us to think we cannot take the Psalms on our own lips. Next, I consider how this approach does not rule out a Christological reading of the Psalms, but in fact leads to a richer and more varied vision of Christ in the Psalms.

Chapters 10-13 consider some of the main groups of psalms and start putting into practice what it looks like to see these as model prayers for believers.

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V., St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 103-4.

<sup>20</sup> Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," 107.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PSALMS AS POETRY

The poetry of the Psalms is a great delight, one of the reasons why the Psalms have become so precious to many. Readers do not need to know the mechanics of Hebrew verse to appreciate the beauty of some of the language and how it makes us *feel*:

O LORD my God, you are very great!  
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,  
covering yourself with light as with a garment,  
stretching out the heavens like a tent. (Ps 104:1-2)

Any discussion of the poetry of the Psalms must not turn delight into a duty—the reason Robin Williams’s English teacher in the film *Dead Poets Society* tells his students to tear out the introduction in their poetry textbook. But, as English teachers point out in response to this film, a certain understanding of poetry can help us enjoy the poems more. Our goal will not be to give an exhaustive and exhausting analysis of Hebrew poetry, but rather to seek to show *how* the Psalms use poetry to affect us: the beauty and nuance, the lingering metaphor, the careful use of repetition.

How the poetry makes us feel is important. The stunning literary beauty of the Psalms is not merely for show, or an unnecessary addition. The poetic beauty is part of the message: to paint something of the unsurpassed beauty of our LORD. We need to see our king in his beauty (Isa 33:17) and yet our hard hearts are sometimes slow to do this. The poetic beauty of the Psalms—like Psalm 104 quoted above—is part of the way the Holy Spirit lifts our hearts to him in adoration.

The trials and temptations of this world come at us in vivid color. We feel overwhelmed, as if we are drowning. Sin looks as sweet as honey. It is not generally at



the level of our intellect that challenges come, but our feelings. The Psalms (along with other parts of Scripture of course) help us to *feel* rightly. They help us not simply to know truths, but to *love* them.

## **Imagery**

### **The Emotional Power of Concrete Images**

Poetry tends to prefer concrete imagery to more abstract concepts. The apostle Paul describes God as “immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Tim 1:17). The Psalms are more likely to say that God is a rock, a fortress, and a deliverer (Ps 18:1). In Psalm 18, David is reflecting on how the LORD has delivered him from the hands of all his enemies. We know the accounts from Samuel of David being on the run from Saul, pursued into the wilderness, hiding in caves. Yet when David describes this in the psalm, he says,

The cords of death encompassed me;  
the torrents of destruction assailed me  
the cords of Sheol entangled me;  
the snares of death confronted me. (Ps 18:4-5)

When David describes his rescue, he does not speak of battles against the Philistines, of swords and spears, of David’s mighty men. The description is not a DVD of what happened. It is impressionistic:

Then the earth reeled and rocked;  
the foundations also of the mountains trembled  
and quaked, because he was angry.  
Smoke went up from his nostrils,  
and devouring fire from his mouth;  
glowing coals flamed forth from him.  
He bowed the heavens and came down;  
thick darkness was under his feet. (Ps 18:7-9)

David’s description is not intended to help the reader know exactly *what* happened. Rather it is meant to help the reader *feel* the emotion of it. “The LORD rescued me from the hand of all my enemies” would be an adequate summary. But David paints a

picture. The LORD is pictured as breathing out fire (v. 8), one who rides on mighty cherubim (v. 10), one whose power dwarfs the power of nature itself (v. 7). David does not simply say that God is mighty and awesome; rather he describes him in a way such that readers *feel* something of his awesome power and might. C. S. Lewis’s famous advice on writing could have been written about the poetry of the Psalms:

Don’t use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was ‘terrible,’ describe it so that we’ll be terrified. Don’t say it was ‘delightful’; make us say ‘delightful’ when we’ve read the description.<sup>1</sup>

So, when reading this poem, there are two opposite mistakes we might make. The first is to try to move away from the poetry to determine “what really happened”—as if this is what is important. We might imagine a preacher summarizing this psalm under bland headings like “The LORD heard; The LORD delivered.” But the power of the imagery has been lost, and with it the very point of the psalm! Our forehead is meant to sweat and our pulse race as we read of this battle, then see the LORD in his awesome battle-glory! Zack Eswine speaks of the dangers of trying to move away from poetry and vivid language to more “safe” theological language:

I can’t imagine that we are left more provided for if we say that “God is omnipotent” and resist saying that “God is an eagle underneath whose wings we are sheltered.”<sup>2</sup>

The second mistake is to stick with the poetry, but to read it too literally: trying to draw a picture of what we see. It would be wrong to read Psalm 18:12 and to think of a meteor shower, or a curious mix of ice *and* burning coals falling from heaven:

Out of the brightness before him

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Letter to Joan Lancaster,” in *C. S. Lewis: Letters to Children*, ed. Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Meade (New York: B & H, 1985), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Zack Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 181.

hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. (Ps 18:12)

We should read the poetry and ask ourselves: what is the emotional force of this imagery? What is the picture being painted? Metaphors still convey truth but do so in a different way to more literal language. The images and metaphors of the Psalms are very intentionally chosen, so we must not either seek to get behind them to “what really happened” nor interpret them woodenly. We should let them affect us emotionally, as they are intended to do.

### **The LORD’s Perspective**

These images have further importance. If the victory in Psalm 18 was first described in literal terms—in terms of chariots and horses—the danger would be that David and others might come to trust in these. If David described how his strategies were vindicated, he might even be led to trust in himself. But describing it as David does in Psalm 18 shows the LORD’s hand in it. David does not just tell things as they appeared—at the level of horses and chariots. He retells the history in a way that God’s role is highlighted. The LORD did this. Hans Hertzberg notes,

David’s history could have been narrated as that of a great and powerful king. This chapter, however, is concerned that it should be understood as the action of a great and powerful God.<sup>3</sup>

### **Imagery from Previous Scriptures**

The images David uses have a strong emotional component. But there is more than this going on—the images he uses are carefully chosen. They evoke the days of the exodus. The foundations of the mountains trembling, with thick darkness all around (vv. 7, 9) is meant to evoke the LORD meeting with Moses at Mount Sinai. The description of the channels of the sea being seen, and the foundations of the earth laid bare at the blast

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Willhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 396.

of God's nostrils is almost identical language to that used of the LORD parting the Red Sea so that the people could pass through (Exod 15:8). David's vivid image of being drawn out of many waters (v. 16) is reminiscent of Moses being drawn out of the water (Exod 2:10).

There were no literal waters parted in David's day, nor was he—as far as we know—ever drowning and pulled out of waters to safety. Rather, David—like the other biblical authors—uses imagery and language from previous Scripture, to show how God's actions in their day are consistent with his actions in the past. David described his present deliverance in terms of God's deliverances in the past, to highlight the fact that God's patterns of working do not change.

David is linking his deliverance to the great deliverance of the past at the exodus. This further increases the emotional impact of the text. All the allusions to the exodus, to Moses, to the LORD's care for his people only increase the view of the LORD that is given. When David or the people may be tempted to fear because of the situations they face, this psalm reminds them in vivid ways of the LORD's power and deliverance, and links his actions in the present to his long history of acting on behalf of his people.

### **Ambiguity**

As well as using imagery, poetry delights in the use of ambiguity. At first, the ambiguity of the Psalms may be a frustration to us—at least to those of us who want everything neat and tidy. At times we cannot be clear exactly what situation is being referred to.

But we are familiar with this sort of ambiguity in other arenas. In the "Classic Albums" documentary about his album "Graceland," Paul Simon speaks of how in the song of this title, "Graceland" refers to more than just a place. As the song begins, he speaks of going to Graceland, and follows this with "Memphis Tennessee." Initially, we are to think of an actual place: the home of Elvis Presley. But by the end of the song,

Memphis, Tennessee, is not mentioned anymore, and Simon simply speaks of going to “Graceland.” He speaks of how “Graceland” has now become an idea—one with symbolic meaning. Of course, this makes it easy for listeners to bring their own meaning and interpretations. The idea needed to be concrete in order to be vivid and powerful—hence beginning with a focus on the actual place, with all the associations this brings. But then the specifics are put into the background so that listeners can engage with the song themselves and find themselves in it.

This is the dynamic we see with the Psalms. There is often a very concrete situation described in the superscription (though of course not always). But then the rest of the psalm is generally more indeterminate, with few details of the precise situation in view. If David’s psalms were full of references to spears being thrown at him, or betrayals by his son, it would be hard for many of us to directly engage with them and see them as relevant to our situations. But when David speaks either in general terms or in metaphorical terms it is much easier for us to use these words for our own situations of trial:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,  
for in you my soul takes refuge;  
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,  
till the storms of destruction pass by.

My soul is in the midst of lions;  
I lie down amid fiery beasts— (Ps 57:1, 4)

The ambiguity of the Psalms is deliberate, so the words of one individual could be reappropriated by others in the community, to use when they are praising, thanking, and lamenting. It would be a mistake to read words like the ones from Psalm 57 and try to determine exactly what situation is in view. In this case, the superscription tells us: David was hiding from Saul in a cave. But this information being kept in the superscription rather than in the text of the psalm itself means others are more able to join in with these words, even when they are not in a cave on the run from Saul.

This ambiguity is a gift to us, part of what makes the Psalms so beloved, as they allow “the later reader to associate with the language and emotions of the original authors in one way or another.”<sup>4</sup> Jamie Grant, writing on this issue, argues that their ambiguity and lack of specificity means that “the Psalms lend themselves to constant reappropriation in a wide variety of settings in human experience.”<sup>5</sup> Grant cautions readers and commentators against the desire to try to reconstruct the exact historical situation of the psalm, which the psalm itself often does not give. “Why do we feel the compelling need to determine the indeterminate? To define that which is deliberately left undefined in the Biblical text?”<sup>6</sup> The ambiguity in the Psalms is not a problem for us, but one of the ways the Psalms commend themselves for reappropriation and reuse in different situations and circumstances of life, as I am arguing for in this paper.

As well as encouraging the reappropriation of the words of the Psalms, the ambiguity in the Psalms has a second function. By not spelling everything out clearly, those who read, pray, and sing the Psalms are forced to engage more, to try to join the dots. The Psalms are impressionistic and have a power to capture the imagination in a way that very precise prose often does not. Of course, this is closely linked to the first point: the way each one of us joins the dots will be somewhat different, as we cannot help but interpret through our own experience. This is not rampant subjectivism; rather it is following the invitation of the Psalms themselves, and the fact that at points they deliberately leave things ambiguous, making us work a little as we read, sing, and pray them.

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<sup>4</sup> Jamie Grant, “Determining the Indeterminate: Issues in Interpreting the Psalms,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 1, no.1 (Winter 2010): 4.

<sup>5</sup> Grant, “Determining the Indeterminate,” 4.

<sup>6</sup> Grant, “Determining the Indeterminate,” 3.

It's 4:30 A.M. on a Tuesday  
It doesn't get much worse than this<sup>7</sup>

These lyrics from Counting Crows perfectly illustrate the combination of concrete specificity and also ambiguity that we see in the Psalms. The singer's overall feeling—of despair, or hopelessness, or monotony—is best illustrated not in a general way, but in one very concrete moment. These are words we are to listen to and think “I know this feeling.” So too, words in the Psalms like these:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. (Ps 63:1)

They capture our imagination. The “dry and weary land” is a very concrete image which brings much emotional force with it. But the overall picture is not so specific that we do not feel these might be our words. The geographic details of “the wilderness of Judah” have been left in the title, much as “Memphis, Tennessee,” were left in the first verse of “Graceland.” Now this “dry and weary land” has become a metaphor for distance from God, for aching and yearning. The ambiguity and indeterminacy of the Psalms is a rich part of their poetry and power; we should heed the warning of Grant and not seek to resolve all the indeterminacy, and to define what is left undefined in the psalm itself.<sup>8</sup> Often, when teaching on a psalm, I will say something like “We don't know the exact situation the psalmist was in here. But we know the feeling, don't we?”

### **Repetition and Parallelism**

Hebrew poetry, unlike English, does not use rhyme. Nor does it have “meter” in the way we are used to: a regular pattern of syllables and stress for each line. This

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<sup>7</sup> Counting Crows, “Perfect Blue Buildings,” track 4 on *August and Everything After*, 1993, compact disc.

<sup>8</sup> Grant, “Determining the Indeterminate,” 3.

makes Hebrew poetry feel immediately unfamiliar to us. But there are aspects of poetry that transcend different languages. Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously described prose and poetry in this way:

Prose: words in their best order; Poetry: the *best* words in the best order.<sup>9</sup>

This applies across different languages, and certainly applies to Hebrew poetry. Hebrew has a much more limited vocabulary than English, which means words must be reused more often. Hebrew poetry uses this to great effect, by repeating words throughout psalms.<sup>10</sup>

Repetition is also used because of the formative nature of language, as I will consider further in the next chapter. If the Psalms were intended simply to state truth, it could be stated once and once only. But if the Psalms are to shape our thinking and emotions, things need to be repeated, pressed down into our heart and soul until they become internalized. Psalm 136 is a case in point: every one of the 26 verses contains the refrain “his steadfast love endures forever.” These are truths that can never be given too much emphasis or repetition! This repetition in Psalm 136 is a means by which the teaching of Psalm 107 can be applied:

Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things;  
let them consider the steadfast love of the LORD. (Ps 107:43)

## **Parallelism**

In addition to words often being repeated in psalms, the most important structural device in Hebrew poetry uses a kind of repetition: parallelism. Hebrew verse tends to come in couplets, where the second line is a kind of parallel to the first:

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 14, pt. 2, ed. Kathleen Coburn and B. Winer, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1972), 68.

<sup>10</sup> Unlike rhyme and other stylistic features that depend on the sound of words (e.g., onomatopoeia and alliteration), repetition and parallelism can easily be retained when the Psalms are translated—especially if a more “word-for-word” translation is used.



By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and by the breath of his mouth all their host. (Ps 33:6)

The goal here is not to be able to identify and correctly label the different types of parallelism used in the Psalms. We remain wary of the caution of Robin Williams's English teacher in *Dead Poets Society*, and that of Wordsworth: "We murder to dissect."<sup>11</sup> Rather, we shall seek to see what *effect* is achieved by different sorts of parallelism, and how this helps us to read and enjoy the Psalms.

### **Parallelism of Repetition**

Sometimes the two lines say essentially the same thing but using slightly different vocabulary. Together they form a composite picture, as in the example from Psalm 33 given above. The two lines are not the same, but it is not our job to try to untangle them or analyze one line in isolation from the other. In this case the second line adds a narrower focus—the stars—and gives greater color. God's word is described in line 2 as "the breath of his mouth," a slightly more unusual image that makes us think a little more. Whilst the two lines say very similar things, this is not mere repetition. The two lines together are greater than the sum of their parts; in just a few words the psalmist has not just conveyed a truth, but evoked an image, all through this careful use of parallelism.

We do not need any special knowledge or information to enjoy such parallelism. But we should at least be aware that the psalmists are painting composite pictures, and that we should not try to pull it all apart for separate analysis. Consider Psalm 92:1-2:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD,  
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;

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<sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in *Lyrical Ballads: with a few other Poems*, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798), 105.

to declare your steadfast love in the morning,  
and your faithfulness by night

Without a sense of how poetry works we might imagine trying to analyze verse 2 as follows: What is it about God's *steadfast love* that makes it the subject of our *morning* prayer? And what is it about God's *faithfulness* that makes it an appropriate subject for the *evening*?

Clearly the psalmist is not wanting us to think like this. This is a composite picture: God's steadfast love and faithfulness are to be declared both morning and night! But the psalm says this in a much more poetic way, with the variety and development in the two lines pointing to the fact that our songs about God will never grow old or boring. More than that, the use of morning and night here may be a merism where two extremes are mentioned, intended to include all that is between. "Morning and night" really means "all the time." But think how impoverished we would be if the psalmist had been so prosaic: "Declare God's steadfast love and faithfulness all the time." The use of this sort of parallelism gives a color and a beauty that is not hard to appreciate, so long as we do not pull apart what the psalmist intended us to read and enjoy together.

### **Parallelism of Contrast**

Sometimes the second line is not a reiteration or development of the first, but a direct contrast:

The LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

Even though this is a different sort of parallelism to repetition, the two lines should still be read together. By putting the two destinies of the righteous and the wicked next to each other at the end of this psalm, the contrast between them is made all the more stark. The second line about the wicked perishing gives a flavor of *life* to the first line about God knowing the way of the righteous. The first line about the LORD knowing the way of the righteous gives a greater sense to the "perishing" in view for the wicked; it

is not simply death but being cut off from relationship with God.

This sort of parallelism invites us to compare and contrast the two destinies. It points us to the absence of any middle way between them: it is one or the other. This contrast is not merely descriptive, it has a polemical force. The reader or singer of this psalm is left with the question: which of these groups do I want to be in? Perhaps we are tempted to think that God “knowing the way of the righteous” is not particularly valuable. The psalm brings this together with the alternative—perishing—to encourage the righteous not to turn aside to wickedness but to keep going in devotion to the LORD.

We are familiar with how powerful contrasts can be. Many years ago, I visited a photography exhibition about an Eastern European country that had been ravaged by war. The exhibition had pairs of photos, showing the same place before and after the war. The photos of the destruction took on greater weight when placed next to a picture of what the place had been before. The pictures of joy and peace took on greater poignancy when placed next to the photos of the devastation that—unbeknownst to those in the photos—was just around the corner.

More recently the photographer Uğur Gallen has created some composite photos, joining images of hardship in Turkey with images of luxury in the West. In one photo a father bathes a child in a ruined building in Turkey, but this transitions into a picture of a luxurious bathroom in the West. Catwalk models parade down the runway, which turns into a picture of refugees trudging across a stony desert. How we feel about each picture is affected by the other picture. This language of contrast is universal and is used by the psalmists to great effect.

### **Other Types of Parallelism**

Sometimes, two pictures are put side by side so we can see the similarities between them; one is like the other, as in Psalm 42:1.

As a deer pants for flowing streams,  
so pants my soul for you, O God.

Sometimes the second line gives a consequence of the first:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)

Sometimes images are piled up, moving beyond the conventional two-line pattern:

The floods have lifted up, O LORD,  
the floods have lifted up their voice;  
the floods lift up their roaring.  
Mightier than the thunders of many waters,  
mightier than the waves of the sea,  
the LORD on high is mighty! (Ps 93:3-4)

We can feel the power of these floods—forces of evil and chaos—as they surge and rise. The intensity grows with each repetition: they have “lifted up,” they have “lifted up *their voice*,” they have “lifted up *their roaring*.” By the end of verse 3 the LORD has dropped out of the picture altogether. The poetry dramatizes the devastating and terrifying power of evil and chaos as it threatens to overwhelm us, just as it overwhelms the conventional pairing of lines and overflows into a third line of surging imagery.

But the next verse answers. In contrast to the building and surging of the floods, we hear a crescendo of “mightier,” “MIGHTIER,” building to the climax and release: “The LORD on high is mighty!” By the third line it is the floods that are mentioned no more, their clamoring can no longer be heard. All is back to stability and safety. The LORD is mighty!

These six lines of verse dramatize the terrifying power of evil and chaos, and how this threatens to overwhelm us, but also the even greater reassuring power of the LORD who sits enthroned over the flood. We are taken on a journey, one which causes our pulse to race and then our heart to be warmed—a cathartic effect which is so much more powerful than if the truths had been stated in prose: “The LORD is more powerful

than any evil or chaos.” We may or may not know that experts call this sort of parallelism “staircase parallelism.” But that hardly matters. What matters is what effect this parallelism brings.

There is an *involving* nature to parallelism: we ask how the second line is related to the first. Sometimes this involves repetition (and development). Sometimes it paints a contrast. What matters is that we read with care and let the poetry work on us—something of course that is even easier if the psalm is read out loud and done so well.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PSALMS AS SONGS

If it were possible to determine who were the most influential theologians of our generation, I am persuaded that Stuart Townend, who with Keith Getty wrote the hymn “In Christ Alone” would be near the top of the list. What we sing profoundly shapes us. As we take words on our lips, there is something even more powerful than when we hear words spoken to us. As we sing, we are making the words our own. This goes far beyond the fact that we often remember what we sing, though this is no less important.

#### **What We Sing Both Expresses and Shapes Our Emotions**

We are familiar with the idea that we need different songs to suit different moods. We want words to help us express what we are feeling—and these words will differ depending on our situation. James 5:13 instructs, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.”

The Psalms are God-given words to help us express a whole host of emotions—they teach us to pray; but the Psalms are not simply there to help us *express* the emotions we have. Praise psalms are not only useful in times when we feel like praising. Thankfulness psalms are not to be left on the shelf until we feel thankful. As well as expressing our emotions, the Psalms can *shape them*.

Again, this is something the New Testament commends to us: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 8:15). Regardless of our own emotional state or circumstances, we are to join in with the rejoicing or the weeping of

others. Even the repeated commands in Scripture to “rejoice” or to “give thanks” are commands that may involve some change of our emotional state. But how are we to do this? Luther was one of many to notice the power of song and music to shape our emotions:

Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God because by her are all the emotions swayed. Nothing on earth is more mighty to make the sad gay and the gay sad, to hearten the downcast, mellow the overweening, temper the exuberant, or mollify the vengeful.<sup>1</sup>

Recent work has shown that it is not simply the music that accompanies the Psalms (when sung) that has power to shape our emotions. There is something formative about taking words on our lips.

### **Formative Speech**

The Psalms themselves teach us that the way we speak is formative for us:

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—  
*let Israel now say*—[emphasis added]  
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side  
when people rose up against us,  
then they would have swallowed us up alive (Ps 124:1-3)

The people of Israel are to articulate (out loud!) how their relief from this distress is because the LORD was on their side. The rest of the words of this psalm are words the Israelites are to take on their lips, to shape their attitude to their situation. The danger would be that they forget the LORD’s work in it, and perhaps attribute their deliverance to their own ingenuity or righteousness, or perhaps never even stop to think about the cause of their deliverance at all. By intentionally speaking of the LORD’s work, the Israelites were not simply expressing their trust and dependence, but actively building and strengthening these. The Psalms teach us that the words we speak are hugely

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<sup>1</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1955), 268-69.

significant in shaping who we are.

In a lecture first given at Highland Theological College in Scotland, Gordon Wenham speaks of the “power of song to capture and mold people’s imaginations and attitudes to life”—something that he believes to have been missed by many interpreters of the Psalms.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he argues, “In some way singing a psalm or hymn is like taking an oath: we are committing ourselves in a binding way to a particular set of beliefs and embracing a lifestyle.”<sup>3</sup>

Wenham is drawing on “speech-act theory.” Speech-act theory has noticed that when someone speaks, often this not only conveys information, but *does* something. Words that seem purely descriptive—e.g., “It’s 10 o’clock” may actually be *doing* a number of things, according to Jennifer Hornsby: “saying what time it is, reminding Jane that it’s time to go to the lecture, alarming Ted.”<sup>4</sup>

So it is with many of the statements in the Psalms. Wenham shows how there is something powerful and distinctive about taking words on one’s own lips. The Psalms contain vast doctrinal truths, but these are not merely to be read or listened to. As Wenham points out, simply to read or hear truth may be an “essentially passive” exercise.<sup>5</sup> Singing (or praying) immediately engages the critical faculties of the individual: will I join in with these words? Can I make them my own? Do I believe them? There is a *commitment* involved here; taking these words on our lips “commits us in attitudes, speech and actions.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Hornsby, “Linguistic Acts,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 489.

<sup>5</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 25.



Take Psalm 23:1 as an example. The metaphor of God being a shepherd is a common one in the Old Testament (Ps 23; Ezek 34). It is one thing to have been taught that God is a shepherd to his people; it is another to take these words on one's own lips: "The LORD is my shepherd."

This is a statement about the LORD, but it is also a statement of personal trust, and even delight. It is a delightful submission to God as shepherd, and a resting in his care. It is a personal appropriation of truths, words that build confidence and foster trust. Even the way we say these words can convey different emphases:

*The LORD* is my shepherd—in contrast to all other siren voices that claim my trust and allegiance

The LORD *is* my shepherd—this is established fact, not something I need to work for or earn, or something that is ever in doubt

The LORD *is my* shepherd—I dwell on the astonishingly personal nature of the LORD's dealing with his people. He is Lord of all, but he is also *my* shepherd.

The LORD *is my shepherd*—I dwell on this image of both protection and provision, and again my doctrine of God is redrawn and I am corrected of any idolatrous views that have God as cold and distant.

One may even ask who is being addressed when I say, "The LORD is my shepherd." Am I telling this to my soul? Am I speaking these words to the idols that clamor for my heart? Am I telling the congregation of believers, to encourage them to do likewise? The words we speak have an incredible power—and range of functions—and so it is no surprise that God has given us words to speak, that will shape us in ways as he sees fit.

### **Examples of Formative Speech**

Psalm 117:1 says, "Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!" If we simply read these words, we might learn that God calls all nations to praise him. But if we speak these words, we find ourselves addressing the nations, calling them to praise. Our orientation is changed—and if we use these words regularly, we find ourselves turned outwards, being formed into people whose whole lives echo and embody this

desire that all nations serve the LORD. It is important to remember that the “nations” never heard these words of the psalm. So, whilst the nations are addressed, the primary purpose of these words is to shape God’s people, to be those whose lives are marked by a desire for all nations to praise the LORD.

One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple. (Ps 27:4)

If we simply read these words, we might admire the devotion of the speaker, or we might feel condemned by how our lives are not marked by such devotion. But what about when we take these words on our lips? We are forced to think whether such words are true of us. For a Christian believer, surely the answer is “Yes—or at least I want them to be!” They are not words that we say in a self-righteous way, congratulating ourselves on our wholehearted devotion. Rather, they are words that express the deep longing of our heart, a longing that we pray will increasingly be dominant in our lives. We want these words to be true, and as we sing them, we grow in conviction that this *is* our deep desire. These are words to grow into.

Modern worship songs are often criticized for speaking too much about *my* desire to praise God, rather than about God himself. But the Psalms—though full of a rich and weighty doctrine of God—do also contain lots of language of “I will praise,” as seen in Psalm 146:2:

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;  
I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

This is more easily understood if we see that the psalmist is doing more than simply describing his own heart; rather, he is *committing himself anew* to this praise.

Donald Evans comments,

Where I report my attitude in the present tense, my utterance is rarely a mere report, equivalent to *your* report of my attitude. It tends to *commit* me to the pattern of behavior to which I am referring; it has a forward reference to behavior for which I am the responsible agent, not merely an observer.<sup>7</sup>

For Wenham, saying or singing the Psalms out loud is like “taking an oath, making a vow, confessing faith.” It is an act of commitment, of self-involvement. He argues, “In singing the Psalms, one is actively committing oneself to following the God-approved life.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Psalms as a Gym**

In this sense, we might see the Psalms like a gym for our spiritual life. We may not naturally feel like praising, like thanking, like weeping with those who weep. But the Psalms give us words to help us do those things. We teach children to say, “thank you,” “sorry,” and “please” even before they really understand what these words mean. We encourage them to say “thank you” even when they are not feeling thankful! This is not an encouragement to hypocrisy—rather we are aware that remembering to say “thank you” is one of the ways we learn to be thankful. So too we should not be afraid of the words of the Psalms that seem to describe a devotion that is beyond us: “I will praise the LORD as long as I live.” These are not words to condemn us, but the psalmist invites us to join in with these words and commit ourselves anew to this life of praise. These are words to grow into.

When teaching such a psalm, I do not say, “Does your praise match that of the psalmist? Do you praise God as you ought?” To do so would be to misunderstand the formative nature of songs. Rather I tend to say something like this:

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<sup>7</sup> Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963), 119.

<sup>8</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 35.

Don't we want to be able to say this with the psalmist? In our better moments, isn't this what we desire? Join in with the psalmist in saying these words—and join in with the psalmist in meditating on the *reasons why* he can say this: the glorious truths about God in the second half of the psalm. As you sing with the psalmist, see if your hearts aren't lifted to God, such that you do want to grow more into this life of praise.

This is very much the dynamic that is picked up in the song “How Great is our God” by Chris Tomlin:

How great is our God, *sing with me* [emphasis added]  
How great is our God  
And all will see how great  
How great is our God.

Moreover, if the Psalms are like a gym to shape our spiritual life, we should also expect that we will sing things that are uncomfortable. One of the arguments I have often heard against singing or praying the Psalms is that they do not fit with how we normally sing or pray. But should we really only sing or pray what is comfortable? Should we not expect that just as the LORD needs to teach us in our doctrine, he needs also to teach us in our doxology: how we sing and pray?

## CHAPTER 4

### WHO IS THE “I” OF THE PSALMS?

One of the first questions I had when I began giving some time to study the Psalms was this: what is my relationship to the “I” of the Psalms? This is not quite the same as asking “*who* is the I?” Rather it is a question of whether I have the right to use these first-person words—e.g., “The LORD is my shepherd”—as *my* words.

This issue comes to particular prominence when we are thinking about Christ and the Psalms. Some who want to read the Psalms “Christologically” argue that the human subject of the Psalms is Christ.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, any subjective use of the Psalms must necessarily be either curtailed, or at least become somewhat complicated. This question of who is speaking is one of the most significant for understanding how we are to use the Psalms.

#### **Psalm 1: Who Is “the Man”?**

Right from the opening words of the Psalter we are forced to consider this question of identity. Who is the “blessed man” in Psalm 1?

Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2)

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *The Dance between God and Humanity: Reading the Bible Today as the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 7; Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms: From Text to Message*, Proclamation Trust (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017-18), 1:56.

There are essentially two options. Some argue that one man (and one only) is in view. People argue for the this along a couple of lines. First, the Hebrew word is a masculine singular. Second, because of the content of what follows, there is only one person who this description could fit: Christ himself.<sup>2</sup>

An alternative reading is to see “the man” as *generic*, meaning “the one who” or even “anyone who.” The English Standard Version (ESV) translators suggest this interpretation in their footnote to this verse: “The singular word for man (*ish*) is used here to portray a representative example of a godly person.”

We see “the man” used in this generic way elsewhere in the Psalter. Psalm 32 also begins with a pronouncement of ‘blessing’— אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁׁרֵי—and again a singular ‘man’ is in view:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Ps 32:1-2)

When Paul quotes these verses in Romans 4, he puts verse 7 in the plural—“those”—showing that he views the singular in the psalm as being *generic*, not trying to identify one and only one man whose lawless deeds are forgiven. Rather the psalm pronounces a blessing on *anyone who* has their sins forgiven.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;  
blessed is the man against whom the LORD will not count his sin. (Rom 4:8-9)

It might be objected that Paul quotes from the Septuagint here, and that this explains the change to the plural. But Paul is not bound by the Septuagint—he differs from it elsewhere—and so Paul’s use suggests that he accepts it as a valid rendering of the psalm. Mark Seifrid comments,

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<sup>2</sup> Ash, *Teaching Psalms*, 2:29.

The singular usage of the Hebrew psalm is paradigmatic in any case, and the psalm itself shifts to a plural in its final verse (32:11). The introduction of the plural into the first verse of the citation therefore makes the universality of the psalm explicit and invites the readers to find themselves in the experience of David.<sup>3</sup>

This is confirmed by the psalm itself. David speaks of his own experience (vv. 3-5) but then calls out, “Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you.” David is saying that the opening wisdom pronouncement “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven”—whilst originally being words describing himself—are words that can be true of all who confess their sins like David did, which is presumably the content of the godly prayer in verse 6.

Psalm 34:8b is another example in the Psalter of “Blessed is the man who,” similar to the opening of Psalm 1. This time, the blessing is pronounced on the one who takes refuge in the LORD. The context of the verse, in particular the parallel with the next verse, shows that this also is a generic use of “the man.”

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!  
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!  
Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,  
for those who fear him have no lack!  
The young lions suffer want and hunger;  
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Ps 34:8-10)

The command “taste and see” in verse 8 is a plural one. Though this is not clear in English, it is addressed to the community. This becomes explicit in verse 9: “fear the LORD, you his saints,” which is a close parallel to the command in verse 8. We see that in both verse 8 and verse 9 there is a command to all the people, followed by a reason given why this command should be followed. In verse 9 the reason is given in the plural, just as the command is: “for those who fear him have no lack.” But in verse 8 the reason uses the singular “blessed is the man.” It would be very strange to think that one

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<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, “Romans,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 624.

and only one man is in view here. But seeing “the man” here as generic, i.e., “anyone” makes perfect sense in the flow of this section.

There is a further reason for seeing “the man” here as a generic way of saying “anyone.” Compare verse 8 with verse 22:

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!  
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps 34:8)

The LORD redeems the life of his servants;  
none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. (Ps 34:22)

Verse 22 speaks of “those who take refuge in him”—proving that in the view of the psalmist, there is more than just one man who takes refuge in the LORD. “Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” is a call to all the community to heed these words and take refuge in God.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding that “blessed is the man” need not refer just to one individual is vital in understanding the Psalms rightly. Even within Psalm 1 there are hints that there is not only one individual in view. At the start of the psalm “the man” is contrasted with “the wicked” (plural). But at the end of the psalm, plural terms are used for both:

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, [*righteous* here is a plural word]  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

This points to “the man” being a generic use here, just as in Psalm 34, meaning “anyone who.” Though of course Jesus Christ perfectly fulfils Psalm 1—as indeed he fulfils the entire law of God—we should not therefore see Psalm 1 as purely a prophetic description of him, and him alone. Rather this psalm paints two vivid pictures—of the righteous<sup>5</sup> and the wicked—and invites the reader to decide which group they want to be

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<sup>4</sup> One should not be surprised by the use of the masculine word *man* here. Using the masculine term is common in the Scriptures when referring to both men and women—e.g., Paul calling Christians *adelphoi*—literally “brothers” but meaning “brothers and sisters.”

<sup>5</sup> As shall be seen in a later chapter, to be “righteous” is not to be perfect, but to be a faithful member of God’s people.



part of.

If Psalm 1 invites its readers and singers to become “the man” who delights in God’s law, this sets an expectation for much more personal appropriation of the Psalms that follow. In fact, the Hebrew word for “meditate” in 1:2 is actually a word that could be translated “mutter.” Psalm 1 is saying there is blessing in taking the law—originally referring to the Pentateuch, but this word is also used in Psalm 78:1 to refer to the words of the psalmist himself—on our lips.

### **Who Is the “I”?**

This discussion of “the man” of Psalm 1 leads to the main question at hand: who is the “I” of the Psalms. Are these words that are only spoken by the psalmist (and therefore perhaps only Jesus) or are they words that we can join in with and make our own?

One key question revolves around David. Nearly half the Psalms are associated with David in the superscriptions. In English translations this is often seen in the heading “Of David” or “A Psalm of David.” The word “of” is used deliberately to show that the Hebrew word here could have a number of meanings. Most straightforwardly it would be seen as indicating authorship, but it could also mean “for David” or “about David.” There is not space here to consider all the arguments, but I will assume that it means “by David” for the simple reason that this reading is the one followed most by those who argue *against* the subjective reading of the Psalms. So, if I can show that Davidic authorship does not prevent the subjective use of the Psalms, I will have overcome one of the strongest arguments against my case.

The question is this: in the Psalms, is David speaking *as King* or as a faithful member of God’s people? Or, more precisely, is David using words *that he can only use because he is king*, or words that could be said by other Israelites? If he is speaking *as king*, and speaking words that *only* a king may speak, then this leads us to see the Psalms

as mainly prophetic of Christ, which for some interpreters would discourage our subjective appropriation of the Psalms.<sup>6</sup>

It is not enough simply to argue that David's words cannot become our words because he is a king and we are not. Not everything about David is related to his unique kingly role. He was a model of spirituality—he was “a man after God's own heart” (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22). Moreover, Jamie Grant has argued persuasively that as king he was to be an exemplary Israelite—and as such a model for the people to follow.<sup>7</sup>

The question is this: in the Psalms does David point only (or at least primarily) to Christ, or can he be an example for believers? Is it legitimate to draw a line directly from David to the believer? Or must the line be drawn first to Jesus?

The second may seem preferable if we want to preserve a “Christ-centered” reading of the Scriptures. But the Bible itself encourages both. David is clearly a type of Christ, as numerous New Testament passages demonstrate. But he is also included as an example in the list of “heroes of faith” in Hebrews 11. Learning from David's life is something the New Testament explicitly encourages!

I agree with Jack Collins's evaluation of Waltke's view that Christ is the singer of each psalm:

He has noted one aspect of David's role as representative, namely as one who embodies the whole people and represents them before God. But he has not accounted for the aspect of David's responsibility to exemplify faithful covenant life

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, the doctrine of union with Christ, together with Christ's own words about how the disciples are to follow his example and expect to share his suffering (Mark 8:34; John 15:18-20) means that even words that were purely predictive of Christ would still have an application to believers who follow in Christ's footsteps. But there is more hermeneutical work to be done in such cases, and the more strongly it has been argued “These are not your words, these are the words of the Messiah and him alone” the more work it correspondingly takes to show how these words can apply to believers.

<sup>7</sup> Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Laws in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (Atlanta: SBL, 2004).

for the people.<sup>8</sup>

Collins very simply lays out the possibilities when reading a “David” psalm:

As a representative, the king was also to aim to be the ideal Israelite. David, then writes as God’s anointed king for His people, and the readers must discern whether the emphasis of a particular psalm is more on David’s role as ruler—which he does not share with “ordinary” Israelites—or more on his role as ideal Israelite, in which case he is an example for all.<sup>9</sup>

### **“Expect My Experience to be Your Experience”**

Rather than thinking that his experience is unique, David tells of his experience because he expects that others will experience the same. This is seen very clearly in Psalm 34. David recounts his own deliverance, but then he calls on the people to expect his experience to be their experience.

David speaks of how he sought the LORD: “I sought the LORD, and he answered me” (v. 4). He then encourages others to seek God by saying they will have the same experience: “those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (v. 10).

This generalizing of his own experience is seen even more in the many parallels between verse 6 and verse 17:

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him  
and saved him out of all his troubles. (v. 6)

When the righteous [plural] cry for help, the LORD hears  
and delivers them out of all their troubles. (v. 17)

David describes his own experience but expects others to find the same to be true—because the character of God does not change. David even describes his own deliverance using exodus language (v. 5; cf. Exod 34:5) highlighting that he is only

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<sup>8</sup> C. John Collins, “Always Alleluia: Reclaiming the True Purpose of the Psalms in the Old Testament Context,” in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, ed. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste (Nashville: B & H, 2012), 30.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, “Always Alleluia,” 30.

experiencing what God did for the people of old and will do for all his people throughout history: “The LORD redeems the life of his servants” (v. 22). The Psalms themselves commend their subjective use—because the God of the Psalms has not changed.

It is therefore no surprise that this psalm—though quoted in reference to Jesus on the cross in John 19:36—is *also* used by Peter in his first letter to speak of the experience of Christian believers (as we shall consider in more detail in the next chapter).

### **The “Original Context” of the Psalms**

One of the main problems with the view that Christ is the singer of every psalm is that it does not consider the original context of the Psalms. What were God’s people in Israel doing as they sang the Psalms? Did they make any sense to them back then?

Collins notes that “most scholars, with a few dissenters, believe the Psalms have the corporate worship of Israel as their primary life setting.”<sup>10</sup> Tremper Longman puts it even more starkly:

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the Psalms were used in the public and private worship of devout Israelites. We might even go a step further and, while affirming that the Psalms were used for private worship, say that most of the evidence for their primary use points to public worship.<sup>11</sup>

While not all psalms have authors attributed, it is striking that nearly all those identified as authors of the Psalms are those involved in public worship. David—author of around half the Psalms—was almost single-handedly responsible for the introduction of corporate singing into the worshipping life of Israel. The other major authors—the Sons of Korah and Asaph—were involved in the public worship of Israel (1 Chr 6:39; 2 Chr 5:122, 20:19).

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<sup>10</sup> Collins, “Always Alleluia,” 18.

<sup>11</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 46-47.

So, the superscriptions of the Psalms point towards the public worship of Israel as the primary setting of the Psalms. Many psalms may have originally been the prayer of one individual Israelite, but these were nonetheless put together to be sung by all God's people. This is backed up by Chronicles: when we read of God's people singing together in Chronicles, it is psalms that they sing (1 Chr 16)!

It is entirely alien to the worldview of the Psalms themselves that the superscription "Of David" should make us think these are words that we *cannot* use. Rather, "Of David" points to community use of the Psalms in song and actively *encourages* us to take the Psalms on our own lips. We might think of a modern parallel: seeing "Stuart Townend" or "Matt Redman" at the top of some words does not make us *less* likely to take them as our own words; it encourages us to think these are words for all God's people to sing! Of course, David has had unique promises made to him (2 Sam 7). There will be aspects of the Psalms that are unique to him. But David did not write personal psalms that only he would ever sing. The people were to join in—as the people joined in with the song of Moses (Exod 15).

But how can psalms of one individual describing their own experience be sung together corporately? First, as noted above, the Psalms are formative speech. We see in David (and the other psalmists) how to pray in a myriad of different situations. These are words we can take on our lips, to both express but also *shape* our emotions. Who better to teach us to pray than David, the man after God's own heart?

There is also another dimension. God's people as a whole were to join in with the prayers of an individual:

By making *individual* laments, thanksgivings, and confessions of sin matters of *corporate* song, they enable the whole congregation to take upon themselves, as their own, the troubles and victories of the individual members, so that everyone can

“rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the huge strengths of Collins’ study notes on Psalms in the *ESV Study Bible* is that for each psalm he considers what the impact would have been on the congregation as they sang these words—and what the impact is on us today as we do likewise. As he puts it, “A good exposition of a psalm will consider how the rhetoric shapes the hearts of those who sing it.”<sup>13</sup> Psalm 3 is a case in point, which is authored by David, and relates to a very specific situation when he was persecuted by his son Absalom. Collins notes,

Here David models genuine faith in his dire straits, and readers can learn to do the same in theirs (which are often less dire). But there is more. The whole congregation sings it, even when it suits the needs of only a few. As fellow members of a body, the faithful own one another’s troubles as theirs and join with the troubled members in bringing their situations before the LORD. And all can then rejoice together when God answers.<sup>14</sup>

Does Psalm 3 typify Christ, and the sufferings he had to undergo before entering his glory? Absolutely. But understanding the original setting of the psalm helps us see we can use it in other ways as well: to learn to follow David’s example of dependent prayer, and also to join in the sufferings of others.

Of course, there are some changes that need to be made as we read the Psalms as Christians. The sacrifices spoken of are fulfilled in Christ’s one true sacrifice. The temple has been destroyed and replaced by Christ dwelling amidst his people. But the experience of faith is the same.

Therefore, after making the necessary adaptations for the new situation, the Psalms serve contemporary Christians analogously to how they served ancient Israel. That is, Christians need corporate songs that shape their inner life to love God and

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<sup>12</sup> Collins, “Always Alleluia,” 29.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, “Always Alleluia,” 29.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, “Always Alleluia,” 32.

treasure what he treasures.<sup>15</sup>

My argument so far has looked at the testimony of the Psalms themselves and seen how they commend themselves for use by all God's people. In later chapters I address some reasons why this might be hard, and what to do on those few occasions where David is speaking as king. The true test of whether this understanding of the Psalms is the right one is to look at the New Testament, which clearly sees the Psalms as testifying to Jesus Christ in many different ways. But do the New Testament authors ever do what we are suggesting here, and see the Psalms as belonging on the lips of new covenant believers? Do they see the Psalms as being words for you and me? This is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>15</sup> Collins, "Always Alleluia," 33.

CHAPTER 5  
NEW TESTAMENT SUBJECTIVE  
USE OF THE PSALMS

Throughout the history of psalm interpretation, there have been great debates about how the Psalms speak of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Gordon Wenham notes his “shock and consternation” when at university he was told that Psalm 2 and others were not Messianic at all, and should not be read as prophetic about Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Modern criticism in the nineteenth century, with its suspicion of prophecy and anything supernatural, removed Christ from the Psalms.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of canonical criticism swung the pendulum back from this. In his seminal essay “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms” Bruce Waltke argued,

The human subject of the Psalms—whether it be the blessed man of Psalm 1, the one proclaiming himself the son of God in Psalm 2, the suffering petitioner in Psalms 3-7, the son of man in Psalm 8—is Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Waltke is drawing on the work of Eaton, but he develops it further. While Eaton argued for a royal hue to the Psalter, Waltke seems to argue that the Psalter is *only* royal:

The Psalms are ultimately the prayers of Jesus Christ, Son of God. He *alone*

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 19-112.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *The Dance between God and Humanity: Reading the Bible Today as the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 67.



[emphasis added] is worthy to pray, the ideal vision of a king, suffering for righteousness and emerging victorious over the hosts of evil.<sup>5</sup>

He argues that the democratization of the Psalms “would be utterly foreign to the culture of pre-exilic Israel” and indeed that the democratization of the Psalms in the synagogues in the intertestamental period was wrong.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament, he says, interprets the Psalms *prophetically*, rather than democratically, and so “wins back for them their original and true significance.”<sup>7</sup>

In British Evangelicalism, there is an increasingly prevalent view of the Psalms that might be crudely summarized this way: “these are Jesus’ words, not yours.”<sup>8</sup> In *Teaching Psalms* Christopher Ash spends a large part of the first chapter explaining why we *cannot* pray the Psalms. “We must take the Psalms away from anyone who thinks they can sing them as an individualistic ‘me and God’ thing, as if they are valid outside of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> His approach is first to say “no”—that we cannot pray any psalm, that the words do not fit us. The Psalms only belong on the lips of Christ. Only then as those united to Christ, can we join in with his prayers, as members of his choir. For example, for Ash, Psalm 63 does not provide us words we can take on our own lips to express our need of

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<sup>5</sup> Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach,” 74.

<sup>6</sup> Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach,” 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach,” 73. Waltke does qualify this somewhat when he states, “Christians, as sons of God and royal priests, can rightly pray these prayers along with their representative Head.”

<sup>8</sup> These precise words were spoken by a church minister to me, summarizing his advice to someone who wanted to pray Ps 23 when in a difficult circumstance.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms: From Text to Message*, Proclamation Trust (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2017-18), 1:59. To be fair to Ash, his more recent teaching is more nuanced, and he admits that he has perhaps overstated the case in this first volume on the Psalms. Yet this book is being read by many pastors. So, I engage here with the view expressed in the book, even while acknowledging that Ash’s view may be somewhat different than this. The phrase, “These are Jesus’s words, not yours” is one Ash would almost certainly disagree with (or at least significantly qualify) but this may be how his earlier writing is being understood by British pastors.

God, rather they are words that speak of Christ's relationship with the Father: and we should delight that *he* has a relationship like this.<sup>10</sup>

One of Ash's arguments for reading the Psalms this way is the way the New Testament uses the Psalms. He gives ten examples of where the New Testament quotes from a psalm as being on the lips of Jesus. He concludes,

Some of these New Testament uses are crystal clear; others are more allusive. But cumulatively they build up a picture of a Spirit-given understanding amongst the apostles that the Psalms are supremely the songs of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

My purpose here is not to dispute that the New Testament authors see these ten psalms as being spoken by Christ. This is fairly clear, and we could even add other examples. But I suggest that the conclusions Ash draws are too broad. Do these examples prove that the *only* way the New Testament authors view the Psalms is as the words of Jesus?<sup>12</sup> Or is the New Testament picture more varied?

The goal of this chapter is to show that the New Testament authors *also* use the Psalms subjectively. James Hely-Hutchinson, after giving a strongly Christological canonical reading of the Psalter, cautions against abandoning "the traditional use of psalms whereby one takes the words of individual psalms on to one's lips in a subjective manner."<sup>13</sup> He cites three examples of where the New Testament uses the Psalms in precisely this way: Romans 8:35-37, 2 Timothy 4:17, and Hebrews 13:6.

I will first briefly consider the examples that Hely-Hutchinson supplies (along with one other similar one) before turning to a more detailed look at the way 1 Peter uses

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<sup>10</sup> Ash, *Teaching Psalms*, 1:86-92.

<sup>11</sup> Ash, *Teaching Psalms*, 1:49.

<sup>12</sup> Again, Ash's more recent (unpublished) teaching would suggest he does have a more nuanced view on this point, so here I am engaging with the arguments as set forth in this book, whilst acknowledging that these may no longer exactly reflect Ash's own views.

<sup>13</sup> James Hely-Hutchinson, "The Psalter as a Book," in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2013), 43.

Psalm 34, which is a good case study for trying to ascertain what method the New Testament authors are using.

### **Romans 8:36 and Psalm 44**

In Romans 8, Paul draws on Psalm 44, a corporate lament where the people face exile-type judgments, even though they have not sinned. Paul uses these words to reassure the Roman Christians that their suffering is not a sign of God's abandonment, rather this has always been the experience of God's people:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.  
(Rom 8:35-37)

Paul's argument only makes sense if the words of Psalm 44 can be taken on the lips of Christian believers. Paul does this with no complicated method; rather he assumes that the situation of Christians is similar enough to that of the singers of Psalm 44, so believers in Paul's day can subjectively appropriate Psalm 44.

### **2 Timothy 4:17 and Psalm 22**

In 2 Timothy 4:17, Paul describes his own experience in language echoing that of Psalm 22: “So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.” In the Psalm, David had asked the LORD, “Save me from the mouth of the lion!” (Ps 22:21)

Commentators argue over whether Paul is referring to being rescued from literally being thrown to the lions, or whether the lions here are metaphorical, referring to his enemies.<sup>14</sup> But either way, the connection with Psalm 22 shows that Paul sees the persecution he is facing to be of the same kind as that the psalmist faced. In this psalm of

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<sup>14</sup> See the discussion in G. W. Knight III, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 471.

lament, which Jesus himself saw fit to use as he cried out in agony on the cross, Paul found words apt for his own situation; he subjectively appropriated the psalm.

Even within the psalm we see a dynamic where the speaker—the “afflicted one”—expects his experience to be mirrored in the experience of others. First David speaks of his own experience, using the word *afflicted* in the singular:

For he [God] has not despised or abhorred  
the affliction of the afflicted [singular]  
and he has not hidden his face from him,  
but has heard, when he cried to him. (Ps 22:24)

Then David generalizes from this, expecting others to experience the same deliverance, now speaking of “the afflicted” in the plural:

The afflicted [plural] shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the LORD! (Ps 22:26)

When Paul subjectively appropriates this psalm, he is simply doing what the psalm itself encourages people to do.

### **Hebrews 13:6 and Psalm 118**

Psalm 118 is another psalm that the New Testament authors see as being prophetic of Christ, quoted over 10 times in such contexts. But the writer to the Hebrews quotes from this psalm and puts it on the lips of Christian believers:

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say,  
“The LORD is my helper;  
I will not fear;  
what can man do to me?” (Heb 13:5-6)

The final three lines “the LORD is my helper” are taken from Psalm 118, which is a psalm celebrating the LORD’s deliverance of his people. The writer to the Hebrews assumes that in this psalm of the LORD’s deliverance and protection, struggling Christians of his own day can find words to make their own, so they can say along with the psalmist

“The LORD is my helper.” The writer to the Hebrews thinks that even Psalm 118, a psalm clearly pointing to Jesus, can also be subjectively appropriated by believers.

It is possible that Paul has this same psalm in mind when he writes Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” This is much less certain, so we should not base too much on it, but it fits the observed pattern that New Testament authors readily saw the Psalms as belonging on the lips of Christian believers; that in the experience of the “I” of the Psalms, there were words that Christian believers could join in with and make their own.

### **2 Corinthians 4:13 and Psalm 116**

In 2 Corinthians when Paul is explaining the gospel ministry that he has by the grace of God, he quotes from Psalm 116:

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak. (2 Cor 4:13)

Paul introduces the quotation by saying “we have the same spirit of faith,” which probably refers not to the Holy Spirit, but to a “disposition reflected by the psalmist.”<sup>15</sup> The premise in Paul’s argument is that the life faith of new covenant believers has great continuity with that of old covenant believers, as expressed in the Psalms. According to George Guthrie, Paul “finds a deep resonance with the faith and the resulting expression of faith portrayed by the psalmist.”<sup>16</sup> There are complexities with this quotation, as Paul is quoting from the LXX, which differs in some ways from the Hebrew text. But the overarching point is clear: Paul found in the words of this psalm words that he could make his own and apply not just to himself but to all who share in

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<sup>15</sup> George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 262.

<sup>16</sup> Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 263.

new covenant gospel ministry. Scott Hafemann notes,

Paul's quotation of Psalm 116:10 would suggest that he views his experience of suffering as a continuation of the experience of suffering as a righteous person that David expressed in Psalm 116.<sup>17</sup>

### **Psalm 34 in 1 Peter**

Psalm 34, which was considered briefly in the previous chapter when considering the "I" of the Psalms, is worth studying in some detail to see how Peter uses it and applies it to his own readers. Rather than there just being one reference to the psalm in 1 Peter, Peter repeatedly draws on Psalm 34 in his letter, finding in David's words to the discontented exiles of the cave of Adullam words that perfectly fit the situation of his own marginalized readers.<sup>18</sup>

### **Analysis of Psalm 34**

Psalm 34 has aspects of thanksgiving psalms, as well as wisdom features. The superscription links it to the events of 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David was on the run from Saul, and sought shelter in Gath of the Philistines, where he was remembered for his victories over the Philistines on behalf of Israel. So, David's place of refuge itself was turned into a place of danger, and he was forced to feign madness, and escaped to the cave of Adullam. There were gathered around him "everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul" (1 Sam 22:3).

This brief historical sketch points to some of the key concerns of the psalm: a hostile situation, a remarkable deliverance from the LORD, and an appeal to others to learn from this for their own lives and orient themselves to the LORD and his good ways.

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<sup>17</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, "2 Corinthians," in *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, Wayne Grudem, J. I. Packer et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2228.

<sup>18</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 39.

The psalm is an acrostic psalm, though imperfect as they often are. This suits it to the wisdom genre, with its idea of universal and comprehensive truths. Moreover, the word *all*, לְכֹל, is repeated eight times in the psalm. David promises to praise “at all times,” and the next instances explain why. It is because of the LORD’s comprehensive deliverance: “from *all* my fears,” “out of *all* his troubles,” “out of *all* their troubles,” “out of them [viz: afflictions] *all*.” “Those who seek the LORD will lack no good thing” [lit: they will not lack *all* good things] and “*all* his bones” will be kept. The final instance (not captured in the ESV) shows that this comprehensive deliverance is for *all* who take refuge in God: “none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.”

**The individual and the community.** The Psalm begins in a very personal way. The first two verses begin in the first person, “I.” This is the account of a personal deliverance. However, the psalmist quickly brings others in: “let the humble hear and be glad” (v. 2). At first, this might be seen as simply an invitation for others to celebrate what the LORD has done for this one person, an opportunity to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Rom 12:15).

The historical situation of David might make us think that this is a call to the people in distress in the cave—“the humble” in the sense of “afflicted.” David became their commander, and would be their king, so the sense could be that they are to rejoice that their leader has been delivered, because of the subsequent blessings this brings upon them.

However, the link that David makes is even more striking. He generalizes from his own experience to the experience of the people. This happens repeatedly in the psalm, to reiterate this point.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me  
and delivered me from all my fears.  
Those who look to him are radiant,  
and their faces shall never be ashamed.  
This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him

and saved him out of all his troubles.  
The angel of the LORD encamps  
around those who fear him, and delivers them. (Ps 34:4-7)

Verse 4 is a statement of the LORD's deliverance for David, but verse 5 speaks of all who look to God being radiant, and not ashamed. The connections are even closer with verse 6. David speaks of being heard by the LORD and being saved. Verse 7 is somewhat parallel, with the LORD's "hearing" being paralleled with the angel of the LORD "encamping" around those who fear him and being "saved" being paralleled with being "delivered." The alternating structure in these verses is showing that David is universalizing from his experience. "This was my experience," he says, "and you should expect no less from the LORD in your situation." The closest of all the parallels with verse 6 is verse 17, which is almost a word-for-word repeat, other than that the singular and specific "this poor man" has been replaced by plurals. The experience of the one man, David, is now the expectation of all the righteous.

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him  
and saved him out of all his troubles. (Ps 34:6)

When the righteous [plural] cry for help, the LORD hears  
and delivers them out of all their troubles. (Ps 34:17)

It is this universalizing of David's experience that leads into the central "wisdom" section of the Psalm, beginning "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good." (v. 8) David is exhorting his hearers to experience for themselves, to let his experience become their own.

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!  
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!  
Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints,  
for those who fear him have no lack! (v. 8-9)

Thus, the second half of verse 8 is another general statement. It is not a statement about one man in particular, rather it has more of the force of "whoever." Verse 8 and verse 9 parallel each other, both beginning with plural imperatives, yet one



concludes with a universal statement in the singular, the other in the plural. The parallel discourages us from seeing more than stylistic difference here in the choice of singular or plural—especially since the singular “man” in verse 8 is paralleled with “those who take refuge” in verse 22.

It is significant to have established this point: that a singular subject may be *generic*. The same is happening in verse 12 with David’s rhetorical question. He is not asking about the identity of one particular man. Rather he is “enforcing a truth by presenting it as the solution of a question that has been raised”<sup>19</sup> Indeed the move to second person invites the listeners to become that “man” of verse 12.

This should inform how the second half of the psalm is to be read. In verses 15-18 the group in view are “the righteous,” again a generalization of whoever trusts in the LORD, in contrast to “those who do evil.” Yet in verse 19, there is a return to the singular, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous [sing.]” (v. 19).

Is this “righteous man” a particular man, or just a general reference? Is he David? Is he the king? At first glance, the consistent use of plurals in verses 15-18, then singular in 19ff would suggest that this צַדִּיק is different to the צַדִּיקִים of verse 15.

But verse 17b and verse 19b are almost identical, suggesting that even if the צַדִּיק and צַדִּיקִים are not to be identified, they nonetheless have the same experience of the LORD. This point is reinforced by the repeated words כָּל in verses 17, 20, and 22, and ברשׁ in verses 18 and 20, which cut across any singular/plural section divisions.

One solution that respects both the consistency of singulars and plurals in this section, but also the use of singulars in a general way earlier in the psalm, is to see that David is moving back to speak of his own experience, but as an exemplary צַדִּיק, and hence one whose experience can still be seen as representative of all צַדִּיקִים.

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<sup>19</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. David Eaton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 495.

A reading like this is further validated by the last line of the psalm: “none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned,” which together with verse 8b brackets the central proverbial section of the psalm: “blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.” David began speaking about his own experience, he ends (vv. 19-21) by speaking of his own experience, but the rest of the psalm shows that he sees his experience to be nothing less than the normal expectation of any and every righteous person.

Thus, there is a democratizing of the Psalm. David’s experiences here are not unique, but exemplary. Longman suggests that the psalmist wrote “with the hope that later hearers (including us) would identify with the speaker.”<sup>20</sup>

David is not presented in kingly terms in this psalm. Eaton, who is quicker than most to see royal elements in a psalm, does not include Psalm 34 in his list of royal psalms. There are aspects, however, that could be seen to have a more kingly hue. “Those who hate the righteous [sing.] will be condemned.” It might be more natural to see this as referring to the king, yet the analysis above has shown that any individual *קִיָּיִץ* could be in view here. The language picks up from the gospel promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 (“him who dishonors you I will curse”) and suggests that every single faithful Israelite should see himself as heir to this promise, even when there is clearly a unique “offspring of Abraham” still to come.

As well as kingly language being applied to the individual believer, so is language used of corporate Israel. Verses 5 and 7 have exodus connotations: being “radiant” like Moses when he met with God, and the angel of the LORD “encamping” like he did around the people of Israel in the desert.<sup>21</sup> Corporately and individually the people of God are to see themselves as inheritors of the blessings of Moses and the wilderness

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<sup>20</sup> Longman, *How to Read Psalms*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> James M. Hamilton, “Taste and See That the Lord is Good” (sermon preached at Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, November 29, 2015), <https://kenwoodbaptistchurch.com/sermons/taste-and-see-that-the-lord-is-good/>.

generation. They are to expect God to act in the same way to them as he did to his people in the past.

Thus, in this psalm, what is true of David, what was true of Israel and Moses, these are applied to the people of David's day, both corporately and individually. Moses, Israel, and David may be types of Christ (as noted in the introduction and assumed here) but are also *exemplars* for the people of God.

### **Psalm 34 in the New Testament**

**1 Peter 2:3.** Peter takes words that were addressed to the Israelite community (first those gathered in the cave of Adullam, later those using this psalm in temple worship) and applies them to his readers.<sup>22</sup> The context of Psalm 34 is most appropriate for Peter's readers (no doubt one reason he repeatedly draws upon it in his letter), as it speaks of being on the run, away from home, and facing hostile powers.

When Peter quotes Psalm 34:8 he changes the mood of the opening verb from imperative to (aorist) indicative, thereby identifying his readers as those who have obeyed this instruction.<sup>23</sup> They have tasted that the LORD is good.<sup>24</sup>

“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps 34:8)

“. . . if indeed you have tasted that the LORD is good” (1 Pet 2:3)

Jobes notes how the “taste” metaphor is “the most intimate and the only one that involves ingestion.”<sup>25</sup> The original hearers of the psalm were not simply called to

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<sup>22</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 138.

<sup>23</sup> The conditional here should be taken as one where the protasis is assumed to be true. D. A. Carson, “1 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed., G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1023.

<sup>24</sup> The omission of “and see” is understandable, since the “taste” metaphor makes more sense in relation to what he has just said about craving pure spiritual milk. Jobes is correct that the context of Ps 34 means the pure spiritual milk here should be understood to be God himself, not simply the Word of God.

<sup>25</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 139.

understand the teaching of the psalm but were called to participate in the story told in the psalm. They were to join with David and see that his experience could be theirs. Peter's readers are seen as those who have done just this; they have participated in the same sort of deliverance that David experienced, and thus they have tasted that the LORD is good.

If the invitation in the psalm "taste and see" is an invitation to make David's experience the hearers' own, then Peter's use of this phrase is an indication that his hearers have done just that. In other words, he is suggesting that they now can identify with the "I" in the psalm. Thus, albeit indirectly here, Peter is encouraging the subjective use of this Psalm.

**1 Peter 3:10-12.** The longest quotation from Psalm 34 comes in 1 Peter 3:10-12:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For

"Whoever desires to love life  
and see good days,  
let him keep his tongue from evil  
and his lips from speaking deceit;  
let him turn away from evil and do good;  
let him seek peace and pursue it.  
For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,  
and his ears are open to their prayer.  
But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil." (1 Pet 3:8-12)

Psalm 34 could be titled "How to live as an exile and stranger" and so it is no surprise that it again proves useful for Peter in explaining to his readers how to live out their faith in a hostile world.<sup>26</sup>

Peter grounds his ethical teaching (vv. 8-9) in the ethical instruction of the psalm. He assumes that what the psalmist spoke to his hearers could be applied directly to

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<sup>26</sup> Carson, "1 Peter," 1036.

Peter's own audience of exiles and strangers. Not only is the content of Peter's ethical instruction the same as that of the psalmist, the reasons for living this way—the blessings the LORD bestows on such behavior—are the same. Peter assumes a continuity of situation between his own readers and the discontented of David's day, as well as later generations of Israelites who sang this psalm.

One issue that concerns some interpreters of the Psalms is some of the “prosperity” teaching of old covenant religion. Promises of life and blessing for obedience are seen as properly belonging to the old covenant not the new, and so psalms that speak this way are not to be appropriated by New Testament Christians without significant spiritualizing, or qualifying, if these psalms are even appropriated at all.

In the psalm, “life and good days” is clearly meant to refer to the blessings of *this* life, not some future existence.<sup>27</sup> It is therefore instructive to see what hermeneutic Peter uses in applying these verses to his readers.

Some interpreters think that in 1 Peter these expressions “take on an eschatological dimension owing to the expression ‘coheirs of the grace of life’ in 1 Peter 3:7.”<sup>28</sup> The whole context of 1 Peter, however, suggests a focus on *this* life. Eternal life has already been spoken of as obtained (1 Pet 1:3-5) and the focus of this section of the letter is on matters concerning this present life. The psalm itself is in fact far from being “prosperity teaching” as commonly understood, demonstrated by phrases such as “many are the afflictions of the righteous,” especially if, as above, the “righteous” here is a generic term. Wilson is right that the psalm speaks of those “who *in the midst of their trouble* experience the blessing of Yahweh” [emphasis original].<sup>29</sup> It is best to see that Peter is taking the passage from Psalm 34 *as originally meant* and applying it to his

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<sup>27</sup> Carson, “1 Peter,” 1037.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, “1 Peter,” 1037.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 574.

readers.

Peter gives an important confirmation of how we are to read Psalm 34. When Peter quotes from Psalm 34:12, he changes the pronouns.

*What man* is there who desires life [emphasis added]  
and loves many days, that he may see good? (Ps 34:12)

*Whoever* desires to love life [emphasis added]  
and see good days, (1 Pet 3:10)

We have argued in the previous chapter that when the psalmist speaks of “the man” (singular) he often is making a generic statement, meaning “whoever.” This is exactly how Peter understands the psalm here. He invites his readers—and indeed all Christians everywhere—to participate in the teaching of the psalm. In doing so he invites his readers to expect the experience of David to be their own experience—to appropriate the psalm subjectively. Jobes summarizes,

Although the psalm originally applied to David, Peter directly applies the hopes and promises of Ps. 33 LXX to his contemporary readers. His logic appears to be that just as God delivered David from his sojourn among the Philistines, God will deliver the Asian Christians from the afflictions caused by their faith in Christ, because they are no less God’s covenant people than was David.<sup>30</sup>

Peter is not innovating in doing this. He is not drawing application from the psalm that he can only do because he is an apostle. Rather, he is applying Psalm 34 according to the Psalm’s original purpose. David composed the psalm to encouraged beleaguered and marginalized believers to expect God to act towards them as he had acted towards David himself. Peter sees that his own readers can see themselves in those David is calling on to expect this; they can make David’s words their own, just as David’s original hearers could make his words their own. Peter is not doing something alien with the Psalm, rather he is using it entirely in line with its original intention and

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<sup>30</sup> Jobes, *1 Peter*, 223.

context; and thus, he is teaching us how to interpret and appropriate psalms like this.

This pattern of David speaking of his own experience and then generalizing it is seen in other psalms. In Psalm 32, after speaking of his own situation, and how he confessed his sins and found the blessing of forgiveness, David generalizes and calls others to do the same:

I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not cover my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"  
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.  
*Therefore let everyone who is godly  
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; [emphasis added]  
surely in the rush of great waters,  
they shall not reach him.*  
You are a hiding place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. (Ps 32:5-7)

Before moving from Psalm 34, we must briefly look at how it is used in John's gospel, where it is seen as prophetic of Christ. It is this prophetic or Christological hermeneutic that some would see as incompatible with the subjective use this thesis has been arguing for. Psalm 34 therefore becomes particularly interesting, as it is a psalm that the New Testament authors use in *both* of these ways.

**Psalm 34 in John 19:36.** It is striking that a psalm that is so pervasively applied to believers by Peter is also a psalm that is quoted by the New Testament as being fulfilled in Christ.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Psalm 34 and its use in John might be seen as a reason why

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, John 19:36 might be seen as not quoting Ps 34 at all, but see passages such as Exod 12:46 and Num 9:12; the close correspondence between John's words and the LXX of Ps 34 make it likely that it is indeed Ps 34 that he is quoting. The exact same verb form *syntribēsetai* is used, suggesting that the source for John's quotation is Ps 33:21 LXX. It is beyond the scope of the enquiry here to look at how the Passover lamb imagery is used in the psalm, and if any notion of vicarious suffering is thereby introduced. Köstenberger notes that in Judaism there was already an identification of the righteous sufferer with the Passover lamb. But primary in the psalm seems to be the idea that God will vindicate the righteous sufferer. Even if in Ps 34 it is not clear how this fits with the Passover symbolism, it is clear that "both motifs converge in Jesus, who was both God's perfect Passover lamb and the paradigmatic Davidic

the Psalms may *not* be applied to believers but should rather be first and foremost seen as Jesus' words.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous,  
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.  
He keeps all his bones;  
not one of them is broken. (Ps 34:19-20)

For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken." (John 19:36)

What is said of the "righteous one" in Psalm 34 is seen as being fulfilled in Jesus. Without the testimony of 1 Peter, we might be tempted to think that John's use of Psalm 34 suggests that Jesus, *and Jesus alone*, fulfills these words.

Unless we are prepared to accept that Peter and John are contradicting each other, we must accept that even a psalm that points to Jesus can also be used to speak of the experience of God's people. Even as David is pointing ahead to the once-for-all death of Christ for his people, David can also be giving a pattern for other believers to follow.

David's experience is typological. He is describing his own experience as a righteous sufferer, but his description points ahead to the "righteous sufferer" par excellence, Jesus Christ.

John's typological use of Psalm 34:20 is not, therefore, a reason to argue that a Christological reading of the Psalms rules out the subjective use of the Psalms. Quite the contrary, it shows that a psalm being fulfilled in Jesus (and quoted by the New Testament in this way) does not prevent it also being subjectively appropriated by believers. Even more sharply, such a psalm as Psalm 34 may be applied to Christian believers *directly* (just as it was applied to David's original hearers). Peter would no doubt agree that Psalm 34 is fulfilled in Christ, and that David is typological of Jesus. But Peter never makes this

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righteous sufferer." Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 503-4.



connection in the letter, rather he just applies the psalm directly to believers.

So, I would agree with Ash that the New Testament see the Psalms (or at least many of them) as pointing to Jesus. But I would not see this ruling the straightforward subjective use of the Psalms. Both are possible, and the New Testament authors use the Psalms in both ways. Indeed, this “both/and” approach is a common pattern, where Old Testament figures such as Moses and David are clearly presented by the New Testament as types of Christ yet are still given as examples of faith in Hebrews 11.

CHAPTER 6  
CLAIMS TO RIGHTEOUSNESS

One of the reasons we may struggle to take the Psalms on our own lips is the claims the psalmists make about their own righteousness:

Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness  
and according to the integrity that is in me. (Ps 7:8)

You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night,  
you have tested me, and you will find nothing; (Ps 17:3)

The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness;  
according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.  
For I have kept the ways of the LORD,  
and have not wickedly departed from my God. (Ps 18:20-21)

We may question how the psalmists can speak like this—especially when elsewhere they confess their sin. But, more pressingly, we do not feel these are words we can say ourselves.

These claims to righteousness are part of a larger question of “the righteous” in the Psalms. The word here—again not obvious in English—is often plural; we might translate “righteous ones.” Who are they? The Psalms are full of promises of how the LORD will act toward “the righteous”:

The LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (Ps 32:11)

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous  
and his ears toward their cry. (Ps 34:15)

But are these promises for us? Or are they promises only for those who are 100

percent perfect? If we read the Psalms like we read Paul, we will struggle with the Psalms. Paul generally uses the word *righteousness* in an absolute sense, referring to moral perfection (Phlm 3:9). But the Psalms (like Matthew’s Gospel) use the word *righteousness* differently.

### ***Righteous as a Status Term***

Frequently the Psalms use the word *righteous* as a status term, in contrast to the *wicked*. This is seen in Psalm 1:

The LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

The terms *righteous* and *wicked* are used to describe those who are God’s people, and those who are not. Psalm 1 presents only two groups: on the one hand, the wicked sinners and mockers, and on the other, the righteous who delight in God’s law. The purpose of the psalm is not to condemn all the readers, saying that they all fall into the group called “wicked.” The purpose is to paint an appealing picture of the righteous life, and in so doing to encourage God’s people not to join the wicked, but to keep meditating on his law.

Psalm 32 shows this even more clearly. Again, there are only two groups in view, and like Psalm 1, a summary is given at the end of the psalm of these two:

Many are the sorrows of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.  
Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart! (Ps 32:10-11)

A contrast is painted between “the wicked” and those who are described as “trust[ing] in the LORD,” “righteous,” “upright in heart.”<sup>1</sup> Being “righteous” is paralleled

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in chap. 3, the use of the singular here “the one who trusts in the LORD” should be seen as a generic use of the singular, meaning “whoever trusts in the LORD” or even “those who trust in the LORD.” Even the context of Ps 32 points to this interpretation, as Ps 32 is describing two different

with “trusting the LORD.” This is not an unachievable perfection. More than this, the main contrast the psalm makes is that the “righteous” confess their sin and find the LORD’s grace, in contrast to the wicked. David starts with his own experience, and speaks of the blessings of sins being forgiven:

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered. (Ps 32:1)

He then urges all God’s people—the “godly”—to confess their sins also, rather than cover them up:

Therefore let everyone who is godly  
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found (Ps 32:6)

In this psalm urging confession of sin, David is addressing the “godly” and the “righteous.” This shows that these terms are not used to speak of absolute moral perfection but are status terms. This is not in contradiction to the teaching of Paul—indeed he quotes verses 1-2 of this psalm in Romans 4:7-8 as part of his argument that salvation is not by good works, but through God’s forgiveness. But this psalm—like many others—uses the word *righteous* in a different way to Paul’s absolute use of the term. Jack Collins notes, “The godly are not expected to be sinless; rather they are those who believe God’s promises and confess their sins (similarly the righteous, v. 11).”<sup>2</sup>

Especially when contrasted with “the wicked,” terms like *righteous*, *godly*, and *saints* in the Psalms are status terms—terms used to refer to God’s people.

### **Relative Righteousness**

While the description *righteous* is often a status term, in many cases it does

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groups, not three.

<sup>2</sup> C. John Collins, “Psalms,” in *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, Wayne Grudem, J. I. Packer et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 976.

have a moral sense to it, indicating something about the person's life.

### **Direction of Life**

David's words in Psalm 18, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, speak of the general direction of his life:

The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness;  
according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.  
For I have kept the ways of the LORD,  
and have not wickedly departed from my God.  
For all his rules were before me,  
and his statutes I did not put away from me.  
I was blameless before him,  
and I kept myself from my guilt.  
So the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness,  
according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight. (Ps 18:20-24)

Is this a claim to sinlessness? Is David being a hypocrite? Has he forgotten Bathsheba and Uriah? David is speaking about how he has lived his life, but he is not describing perfection—which would be a flat contradiction of what he says elsewhere as he confesses his deep sins (Pss 32, 51). But he is speaking of the overall direction of his life—the “general, overall fidelity to Yahweh.”<sup>3</sup> David did not turn away from the LORD like Saul did, nor did he seek to take the kingdom by force, despite numerous opportunities to raise his hand against Saul. When David sinned, he turned back to God in repentance—as Psalm 32 and 51 evidence. Dale Ralph Davis comments, “When David speaks of his righteousness and purity, he does not point to sinless perfection but life direction.”<sup>4</sup>

Christopher Ash makes similar points about Psalm 119, which begins “Blessed

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<sup>3</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1999), 239.

<sup>4</sup> Davis, *2 Samuel*, 239.

are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!”:

To be blameless does not mean to be sinless. Job was blameless (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), but he was not sinless. Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, “walked blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the LORD” (Luke 1:6, in a striking echo of Psalm 119); but they were not sinless. To be blameless is to have integrity, to be the same on the outside as we appear on the inside.<sup>5</sup>

The LORD himself speaks of David in such terms, saying he “kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes” (1 Kgs 14:8). And this of a man who was a murderer and adulterer!

We will not understand the Psalms—nor indeed much of the rest of Scripture—unless we understand that words like *righteous* and *blameless* can be used of a life direction, speaking not of sinlessness, but nevertheless of a real obedience of faith.

### **Righteousness in a Particular Situation**

A related way in which *righteous* can be used in a relative sense is when referring to a particular situation. This explains some of the strongest claims to righteousness in the Psalms:

Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness  
and according to the integrity that is in me. (Ps 7:8)

You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night,  
you have tested me, and you will find nothing; (Ps 17:3)

In both of these psalms, David is speaking of a particular situation of distress. David is claiming that he has not done anything to deserve how he is being treated. In

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 25-26. Attentive readers may notice that it seems Ash has changed his view on this, as in his later books on the Psalms he argues that such language does point to Jesus Christ being the only one who can fulfil them. In *Bible Delight* he explicitly argues against this view: “We need therefore to ask who can sing the psalm. Because we might read in verse 1 the words, ‘Blessed are those whose way is *blameless*,’ and respond, ‘Well, there we are, I knew I couldn’t be expected to sing it! Only one man has ever been blameless, and it is not me. The Lord Jesus Christ can sing this psalm. But he must sing it alone.’ . . . But this is not so” (25).

Psalm 7, he is facing persecution from Cush, a Benjaminite, and being accused of treachery. David strenuously denies these allegations:

O LORD my God, if I have done this,  
if there is wrong in my hands,  
if I have repaid my friend with evil  
or plundered my enemy without cause,  
let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it,  
and let him trample my life to the ground  
and lay my glory in the dust. (Ps 7:3-5)

It is in light of these allegations that David asks to be judged according to his righteousness (v. 8). David is *not* speaking of final judgment and asking that it be by works. He is speaking of vindication *in this particular situation* and saying that his innocence is one reason the LORD should deliver him.

This is a vitally important pastoral point. Biblically, there is such a thing as an “innocent sufferer”—like David here, or Job. It is true that we are all sinners. But it is also true that often we suffer for things that are not our fault and can plead this innocence before the LORD.

Rather than be a cause for self-righteousness, psalms like these should be a challenge to us as Christians today. We should aspire to be able to pray like this more often. Sometimes we suffer directly due to our own sin—as David did through his adultery with Bathsheba. And graciously the LORD enables us to cry out to him for mercy. But we should long that these occasions are few, and that more often when we cry out to God we can say with David “this is not due to my sin!” We should long for the obedient faith that David models here, for the blamelessness and righteousness that he displays.

### **The Absolute Righteousness to Come**

As we have seen, when David appeals to God on the basis of his righteousness, this is a relative righteousness—either a direction of life, or innocence in a particular

situation. But these claims point forward to Christ, the only one whose righteousness was absolute—sinless perfection. Derek Kidner makes this point from Psalm 18: “David could quite properly use this language within a limited frame of reference, the Messiah could use it absolutely.”<sup>6</sup>

This means that so long as we exercise care, claims to righteousness need not be a reason for believers not to take psalms on our own lips. David was not a hypocrite in using language of righteousness. These are words that can and *should* be increasingly true of believers.

But these words do also point to Christ. Not as “prophecies,” words that had no meaning or fulfilment until Christ came. Rather these psalms point to Christ *typologically*. David’s relative righteousness—which all Christian believers can strive for—is fully fulfilled in Christ, whose righteousness is absolute.

### **Conclusion**

Claims to righteousness are one of the reasons that the Psalms may feel alien to us—especially if we are more used to the language of Paul. Even though the language of the Psalms is somewhat different than that of Paul, the theology is the same.<sup>7</sup> David models that all God’s people need to confess their sin (Ps 32). He testifies that God cannot dwell with wickedness, and so only through God’s covenant love will David be able to enter God’s house (Ps 5:4,7). David speaks of the blessing of being forgiven (Ps 32:1). The Psalms do not lead God’s people to self-righteousness, but rather to humble dependence on God. But like the letter of James, they also call on God’s people—the

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: IVP, 1973), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ps 143:2 is the one example in the Psalms where David uses the word *righteous* in a more absolute sense: “Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.”



righteous—to live out this status in moral living. The Psalms call us to a *way*, as Psalm 1 shows us. Ash contends,

This truth of the absolute need for holiness of life needs to be re-emphasized today. The life of discipleship is not a spectator sport. We do not just watch Jesus walk the walk and then thank God that because Jesus has done it, we do not need to. Discipleship is to walk in his ways.<sup>8</sup>

So, all the promises in the Psalms about how the LORD treats the righteous *are* promises for God’s people. They are promises to encourage and assure, but also motivate God’s people to keep living as the righteous, and not turn aside to wickedness. The Psalms “turn up the contrast”<sup>9</sup> between the righteous and the wicked, showing the great blessings of being among the righteous, and the very real peril of being counted among the wicked.

The claims to righteousness in the Psalms are not claims to perfection, nor are they hypocritical words. They are the words of faithful believers, describing their God-oriented life. These words should certainly not cause us to think we cannot take the Psalms on our own lips. John Piper, speaking of such psalms, puts it very simply: “Are you among the righteous, the upright, the blameless, and those who walk in integrity? If you are a Christian, you should answer *Yes*.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ash, *Bible Delight*, 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Pete Wilkinson for this illustration.

<sup>10</sup> John Piper, “Can Anyone Really Be Blameless? Wrestling with Righteousness in the Psalms,” *Desiring God* (blog), May 1, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/can-anyone-really-be-blameless>.

## CHAPTER 7

### ENEMIES

Another reason the Psalms can feel unfamiliar to us is because the psalmists regularly speak of enemies:

When evildoers assail me  
to eat up my flesh,  
my adversaries and foes,  
it is they who stumble and fall.  
Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war arise against me,  
yet I will be confident. (Ps 27:2-3)

My soul is in the midst of lions;  
I lie down amid fiery beasts—  
the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,  
whose tongues are sharp swords. (Ps 57:4)

For many Christians today, these things seem far removed from our own experience. This might lead us in one of two directions. We might think these are *not* words for us to say and join in with. Perhaps we think these are only the words of Jesus Christ, who we know to have been persecuted by his enemies. Or we might apply them too readily to *any* difficulty we face at the hands of others—perhaps someone at work who is treating us unkindly, or a family member with whom we have an argument.

To help us navigate if and how we should use such psalms we need to first think of the Psalms in their own context. Who are the enemies that the psalmists face? Beginning in Psalm 1 we see there are only two groups of people. The righteous, represented by the blessed man, and the wicked. The righteous delight in God's law and go his way. The wicked rebel against him. Psalm 2 tells us more about the wicked.

Verses 1-2 say,

Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
“Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.” (Ps 2:1-3)

The word *plot* in Psalm 2:2 is a word meaning “mutter” and is used in Psalm 1:2 where it is translated “meditate.” The righteous meditate on (mutter) God’s law. The wicked plot (mutter) against the LORD and his anointed, rejecting his authority. This is the archetypal sin: dating right back to the garden of Eden where Satan encouraged Adam and Eve that life was better without God and so they should cast off his rule.

We should notice that the people plot against the LORD *and* his anointed—that is, his king. Again, this is similar to Satan’s attack on Adam, whom God had given dominion on earth. Satan cannot attack God directly, so he attacks his vice-regents. As D. G. McCartney puts it, “By dethroning man on earth, Satan thought to dethrone God’s reign on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Psalms too, we see Satan attacking the LORD’s anointed king, the one who brings God’s kingdom on earth. The links with Genesis 3 are highlighted by the word used for enemies in the Psalms. The word used for enemy is often אֹיֵב and is very closely linked to the word אִיְבָהּ which is the word describing “enmity” between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15. The enemies in the Psalms are those who are at enmity with God and his people, in particular his king. To rage against the king is to rage against God. To attack the people is to attack God. Set in this context the enemies David speaks of may be seen as those who oppose him

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. McCartney, “Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vicegerency,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 15.

because he belongs to the LORD, in particular because he is God's king.

This gives us a framework for how we may or may not use these words ourselves as Christians today. I must not see the enemies in the psalm as simply *my* enemies. The enemies in view are enemies of God, of his king, and of his people. In the Psalms, this is primarily physical enemies who attacked David, whether that is Absalom, his son, or Saul, because they wanted David's kingship. But standing behind these enemies is always the great enemy, Satan. This is the conflict between Satan and God, and therefore between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman spoken of in Genesis 3:15. The enemies in the Psalms are the "offspring of the serpent": those who do Satan's will and attack God's people. The offspring of the woman is God's people in general, and the king in particular.

So, it is entirely appropriate for Christians today to use these words about enemies to reflect on our struggles against Satan:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)

But like for David and the psalmists, Satan will often use *means* to attack God's people. Today it is estimated that 1 in 10 Christians will face persecution due to their faith. They will experience this rebellion of the peoples against the LORD. Some Christians today may find Psalm 27 to be their literal experience: evildoers assailing them, an army camped against them, war rising against them.

But for many Christians today this is not their situation. Is it legitimate to see these words about enemies as referring to the trials of life—such as sickness, persecution that is not physical, struggles in relationships? In Scripture, Satan uses precisely these means to ultimately seeking to undermine their faith, as seen in the book of Job. Paul is not being fanciful when he says the last *enemy* to be destroyed is death (1 Cor 15:26).

So how might a Christian read Psalm 27?

Though an army encamp against me,  
my heart shall not fear;  
though war arise against me,  
yet I will be confident. (Ps 27:3)

I do not have the right to arbitrarily decide who my enemies are and assume these psalms speak of the LORD's deliverance from them. But we can see these enemies in the context of the age-long struggle between Satan and God's people and between the means Satan uses to attack God's people. We do not need to face literal sword and spear to use these words in the Psalms. These verses can speak to Christians today of the LORD's ultimate deliverance of his people against all the wiles and schemes of Satan; they speak of all the schemes Satan might use to undermine the faith of God's people—whether these attacks are physical, emotional, relational, or whatever. All these things can properly be described as “enemies” if seen as part of Satan's means of attacking God's people.

But also, as we use such words, we can join in with the prayers of Christian believers around the world for whom daily life *does* involve physical persecution and war. At a church retreat I led a prayer session through Psalm 27 immediately after we had heard news of missionaries working in a war-torn country. I had not known that this interview was going to happen, but in the LORD's providence Psalm 27 provided words for us to use to pray for those who were facing war, that they would know the confidence and comfort David expresses in Psalm 27.

When the Psalmists speak of their enemies, these *are* words that we as Christians can join in with. We should be aware of who the enemies are, and we should be mindful of the entire body of Christ, rather than praying these prayers in a very individualistic way. But even when the Psalmists speak of enemies, these are words for Christians today to be able to use as they align themselves with God and his king.

## CHAPTER 8

### PRAYING FOR JUDGMENT

Perhaps the most common objection to taking the Psalms on our own lips is the issue of praying for judgment—or what are often known as the imprecatory psalms:

Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one dwell in their tents. (Ps 69:24-25)

As David Murray puts it, “How can we sing the Psalms when so many of them ask God to curse our enemies?”<sup>1</sup> I will consider psalms such as these in the rest of this chapter, but first I must put the “problem” into perspective. While calls for God to judge are commonplace throughout the Psalter, there are only around 20 psalms out of 150 where this is a dominant enough emphasis that the Psalms have been designated “imprecatory” and caused people to wonder if it is appropriate to pray such things. So, we have 130 or so psalms that do *not* contain such imprecations. Often when teaching seminars on praying the Psalms, I tell people to ignore the imprecatory psalms for the moment. We do not need to be able to pray *every* psalm before we can pray *any* psalm. As we shall see, I do think there are things to be said about these psalms that help us see how they may be used in certain situations; but until then, we have 130 other psalms where this is not an issue. I often tell people to incorporate all the non-imprecatory psalms into their prayer life, and once they have done this so much that these psalms have

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<sup>1</sup> David P. Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” in *Sing A New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 111.

become so familiar and boring, then come back and we will talk about imprecatory psalms. No one has yet come back! And if someone did do this, and really incorporated the other 130 psalms into their spiritual life, they would be so shaped by God and his priorities that they would be a long way towards knowing how to incorporate psalms of judgment in a biblical and godly way.

If we decide to sing and pray the Psalms, the majority of our time will not be in psalms of judgment so we must be careful not to let our questions around these psalms cloud our view of the whole.

### **Harsh Words**

Perhaps the first thing that strikes us about the “imprecatory” psalms is not that the psalmists call for God to judge, but the *harshness* of the judgment that is called for.

May his children be fatherless  
and his wife a widow!  
May his children wander about and beg,  
seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!  
May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!  
Let there be none to extend kindness to him,  
nor any to pity his fatherless children! (Ps 109:9-12)

Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one dwell in their tents.  
For they persecute him whom you have struck down,  
and they recount the pain of those you have wounded.  
Add to them punishment upon punishment;  
may they have no acquittal from you.  
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous. (Ps 69:24-28)

Psalms like the two quoted above lead some commentators to suggest these

imprecatory psalms are an overflow of human anger, rather than godly prayer.<sup>2</sup> Two points should be made to set these prayers in context, which although not completely solving the puzzle of imprecations, do give us a better vantage point from which to consider them.

### **The Principle of Retribution**

The judgments that the psalmists call for, though harsh, are in fact in line with the ethics of the rest of the Old Testament. The punishments are to be commensurate with the crimes committed, as expressed in the *lex talionis* (Lev 24:19-21). This is particularly seen in the calls of the psalmist for the wicked to suffer the very evils they are trying to inflict on others:

Let the wicked fall into their own nets,  
while I pass by safely. (Ps 141:10)

For without cause they hid their net for me;  
without cause they dug a pit for my life.  
Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it!  
And let the net that he hid ensnare him;  
let him fall into it—to his destruction! (Ps 35:7-8)

Even the harshest of all the imprecations is simply a prayer that the Babylonians would suffer the very same evils they have inflicted on God's people:

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,  
blessed shall he be who repays you  
with what you have done to us!  
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones  
and dashes them against the rock! (Ps 137:8-9)

### **Poetic Language**

We have already seen how the poetry of the Psalms uses very vivid and

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<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 129-34.



concrete imagery without the qualifications we might find in a prose account. This should not be a reason to discount all the imprecations as “mere poetry” but we should read them according to the genre of literature that they are. We should not, therefore, push every detail of the judgments called for, but understand the overall picture being painted. Just as—as we shall see later—the psalmists can lament to God that he has forgotten them even though this is only an incomplete part of the picture, so psalmists can call for judgment, even though there is more to be said on the matter.

### **God’s Enemies**

The calls for judgment in the Psalms arise from very extreme situations. The psalmists have been severely ill-treated by their enemies, and without reason:

For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,  
speaking against me with lying tongues.  
They encircle me with words of hate,  
and attack me without cause.  
In return for my love they accuse me,  
but I give myself to prayer.  
So they reward me evil for good,  
and hatred for my love. (Ps 109:2-5)

These are not petty or trite problems that the psalmists are complaining about. This is persistent and serious evil. More than that, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the enemies in the Psalms are those who oppose God, his king, and his people. It is vital to understand this if we are to correctly understand the calls for judgment. The imprecations in the Psalms are not simply the calling down of curses upon anyone with whom the psalmist has a grievance; rather, they are part of a larger picture of God’s covenant purposes in the world.

The first call for judgment may be in Psalm 3. The New International Version (NIV) and ESV translate verse 7 somewhat differently:

Arise, O LORD!  
Save me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;

you break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:7 ESV)

Arise, LORD!  
Deliver me, my God!  
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;  
break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:7 NIV)

Whereas the ESV sees the third line of this verse as a statement of what God *does*, the NIV sees this verse as being a *call* to God to act in this way. Both translations are possible, with the NIV translation seeing the qatal verbs in line three as continuing the imperative force of the verbs in the first two lines.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the psalmist is directly asking for it or not, God is certainly judging the enemies according to verse 7. As was noted in the previous chapter, the word here for enemies is **אֹיְבֹתַי** which is very closely related to the word used for the enmity between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent in Genesis 3:15. Moreover, the references to striking the jaw/cheek of the enemies may be a further allusion to the offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent.<sup>4</sup>

So, Psalm 3:7 is either a promise that God will do what he promised in Genesis 3:15, or perhaps a prayer of David that God would do this. Following in close proximity to Psalm 2, this resembles very closely what God promised to do through his anointed king:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Ps 2:8-9)

The enemies in view in Psalm 3 should be seen as the same sort of enemies as

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<sup>3</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 113.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew words used here for “strike” and “crush” are not the same, so this is only a possible allusion, but one that may lend weight to the argument being made that Gen 3:15 is the background to this verse in Ps 3.

those in Psalm 2, those who set themselves against the LORD and his anointed. In the face of such rebellion the LORD is not passive. Rather he has set his holy king on Zion and given him authority to judge these rebels. As noted above, the Psalms “turn up the contrast” between the righteous and the wicked. Right from Psalm 1, two ways have been presented, and two only:

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:6)

What has been presented as a general truth in Psalms 1-2 is now in Psalm 3 applied more directly to a specific group of people who oppose David. God will judge them. The link with Psalm 2 does give further context to these requests. Psalm 2 spoke in stark terms of the coming judgment through God’s anointed king, but this judgment was not presented as unavoidable. The call was to repent and live:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps 2:10-12)

The announcement of judgment—and possibly even the judgment itself—may be an opportunity for these enemies to kiss the son and take refuge in the LORD, something I will consider in more detail later.

### **Salvation and Judgment**

Before we move from consideration of Psalm 3, we should reflect how salvation and judgment belong together in this psalm. God’s judgment of the wicked is sandwiched between statements about the LORD saving his people:

Arise, O LORD!  
Save me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;

you break the teeth of the wicked.

Salvation belongs to the LORD;  
your blessing be on your people! (Ps 3:7-8)

Biblically speaking, salvation and judgment go hand in hand. It is impossible for God to save his people without also judging the wicked. The very first “gospel” in the Bible in Genesis 3:15 is itself an announcement of judgment—that the serpent’s head will be crushed by the offspring of the woman. Without the defeat and removal of evil, there can be no salvation.

This same dynamic is present in the gospel announcement to Abraham:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1-3)

The curse on those who dishonor Abraham and his offspring is no less part of the gospel than the blessings announced here. In fact, the blessings on Abraham and his offspring are not possible without the judgment on those who oppose God’s people.

In the book of Revelation, an angel announces the “eternal gospel” and does so in terms of God’s judgment of all evil:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Rev 14:6-7)

The salvation of God’s people in Scripture is always linked to the judgment of evil.<sup>5</sup> As T. D. Alexander puts it, “Jesus has come to bind the strong man, Satan, and plunder his house. To establish the reign of God on the earth it is necessary for the evil

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<sup>5</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 78. Hamilton references this throughout his work.

one and those with him to be defeated.”<sup>6</sup>

This is not always an emphasis in western Evangelicalism. Perhaps we find it easier to speak of the blessings of salvation rather than the reality of judgment. But the Psalms do not allow us to separate these two. John Goldingay speaks of how the prayers for deliverance in Psalm 3:3-6 are insufficient on their own: “Those verses [viz. vv. 3-6] spoke only of protection and made no statement about trouble for enemies. But in the real world, protection and deliverance means the defeat of enemies, and this is not a pretty matter.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Ending of Evil and Righting of Wrongs**

Erich Zenger, in his study of the imprecatory psalms, notes the rather thin, individualized, and spiritualized Christianity that pervades the western church.<sup>8</sup> Gordon Wenham summarizes Zenger’s work:

A belief in divine judgment is essential in a world where there is much suffering, oppression and injustice. If we do not believe in this judgment, we have no gospel to offer the suffering world. These psalms awake our consciences to the anguish of those who suffer. They serve to waken us from the dreadful passivity that has overtaken the comfortable churches of the Western world. They make us long for the coming of the kingdom in power and justice.<sup>9</sup>

The future hope (and desire!) of the psalmists is not simply some privatized salvation, but the ending of evil and the righting of wrongs. Long before the protest songs of slaves in the deep south of America, or the anti-war songs of the 1960s and 1970s, the

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<sup>6</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: Exploring God’s Plan for Life on Earth* (Nottingham, England, IVP: 2008), 113.

<sup>7</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:113.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Zenger, *God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). The discussion in this section largely follows Wenham’s analysis of Zenger’s work: Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 134-45.

<sup>9</sup> Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 135.

psalmists sang protest songs asking God to end the oppression perpetrated by the wicked. But like the protest songs of Dylan and others, it is striking that the imprecatory psalms are most jarring to those who are largely comfortable and prosperous. It is just not how decent, civilized Christians speak (or so we think). In an evangelical culture that is sometimes narrowly focused on “getting souls to heaven” it is no surprise that songs that call for justice in the world seem unfamiliar or perplexing. But the problem we find with the imprecatory psalms may be more a reflection on our own spirituality than that of these psalms. Zenger questions,

The directness of the challenge to God and the certainty it expresses that God must be at work in history and society form the real provocation of these psalms for a Christianity whose belief in God has exhausted its historical potential in soteriology or postponed it to an afterlife by a privatist and spiritualizing attitude?<sup>10</sup>

For the psalmists, these prayers for judgment are vital, as they seek to bridge the gap between what the psalmist experiences—evil, oppression, injustice—and what the psalmist knows about God. For contemporary readers, these psalms are vital because they remind us that we *should* experience a disconnect between what we know about God and what we experience in the world. We are reminded that God *does* care about justice, about oppression, and about his people being treated rightly. As Zenger puts it, if we remove the imprecations from the Psalms, and refuse to speak of God judging, this “would reduce the biblical God to a spectator uninterested in the world.”<sup>11</sup>

As well as calling for judgment and justice “out there,” the imprecatory psalms should jolt us out of any complacency about our own situation. In times when abuse of power within the church is increasingly rife, such psalms calling for God’s judgment on the wicked and abusive should be a warning to those who use them not to think they can

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<sup>10</sup> Zenger, *God of Vengeance?*, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Zenger, *God of Vengeance?*, 73.

get away with such behavior. Goldingay gives Psalm 10 the title “How to pray against the powerful,” but then concludes with a strong warning: “Most readers of this commentary therefore have to see themselves as the people who are being prayed against.”<sup>12</sup>

These psalms calling for judgment remind us of God’s hatred of evil and his determination to do something about it. If Christians do not confront evil, this can lead to the idea that God is not concerned about it either; it can in fact empower those who continue to use their power to evil ends. Perhaps we are uncomfortable praying the imprecations because we think the coming of Christ means now we pray for forgiveness not for judgment. But an abused wife does not simply need to be told to forgive, she needs to be told that what has happened was *wrong* and that God will judge. In fact, it is only this truth that God will judge that allows true forgiveness to be possible, committing judgment to the LORD and not taking revenge.

We must ask, have we in the church not often been responsible for obscuring this liberating meaning of the message about God’s final judgment, because we have preached the word of judgment loudly and urgently to the weak and defenseless, while frequently our preaching has been too soft and half-hearted when directed to the powerful of this earth?<sup>13</sup>

David Murray speaks of how, at a time when he was personally struggling with the imprecatory psalms, he spent some time with Romanian Christians fleeing Hungary to escape the persecution under Ceausescu. He recounts when he asked these Christians what they thought of the imprecations: “They looked at me with puzzled expressions and told me that Romanian Christians sang the imprecatory psalms more than any others, and they did so without any qualms or questions.”<sup>14</sup>

Not only do the imprecatory psalms give words to such people when they face

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<sup>12</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:184.

<sup>13</sup> Synod of Würzburg, quoted in Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” 119.

persecution like this but praying these psalms can help the rest of the church—particularly if not facing persecution—to empathize and join in solidarity with suffering believers and cry out with them for justice. If I read the imprecations and feel they do not fit my experience, perhaps this is a sign I have lost touch with the reality of the fact that when one member of the body of Christ suffers, all suffer with it (1 Cor 12:26).

### **Can God’s People Pray this Way?**

The fact that God judges is hard to dispute, but some argue that the imprecations in the Psalms should be seen as predictions of what God will do, rather than actual prayers asking him to act this way. In some psalms (for example, Psalm 3 discussed above) both interpretations are possible, but in other psalms there is no such ambiguity; the psalmists do call upon God to act in judgment, as seen below.

Make them bear their guilt, O God;  
let them fall by their own counsels;  
because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out,  
for they have rebelled against you. (Ps 5:10)

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer;  
call his wickedness to account till you find none. (Ps 10:15)

It might be argued that for believers (whether Old Testament believers or New Testament Christians) to pray this way is inappropriate. I remember seeing a metrical Psalter years ago that rendered all calls for judgment as statements about what the LORD would do. The editors argued that while God’s judgment was indisputable, it was not appropriate for believers to presume to pray for it.

But when reading the imprecatory psalms, what is striking is the *lack* of personal retaliation towards those who are opposing God’s people. The ethic of the Psalms is one of committing judgment to the LORD. David can instruct the people in non-retaliation in Psalm 34 because of what he knows to be true about the LORD’s ultimate and certain judgment:



Keep your tongue from evil  
and your lips from speaking deceit.  
Turn away from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.  
The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous  
and his ears toward their cry.  
The face of the LORD is against those who do evil,  
to cut off the memory of them from the earth. (Ps 34:13-16)

Psalms that call the LORD to judge are ways of committing judgment to the LORD. They are even ways of dealing with anger, of obeying the command of Psalm 4:4: “Be angry and do not sin.” If God’s people were to take things into their own hands, they would doubtless respond with unrighteous anger, and the response would not always be the right one. Asking God to judge always has the qualification “as you see fit.” The imprecations are safe ways to lay aside sinful anger and commit judgment to the LORD. Moreover, it would be strange to see judgment as part of God’s plan yet refuse to pray for it. Robert Dabney puts it this way: “Righteous retribution is one of the glories of the divine character. If it is right that God should desire to exercise it, then it cannot be wrong for his people to desire him to exercise it.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Praying for Repentance?**

As noted above, the ending of Psalm 2 sets all announcements of judgment in the context of the possibility of repentance. Evildoers are called to “kiss the son” and find refuge in God. The possibility of repentance is not generally stated explicitly in psalms that speak of God’s judgment, nor do the psalmists generally pray for it when asking for judgment. But one example stands out where the conversion of the enemies is in view:

O my God, make them like whirling dust,  
like chaff before the wind.  
As fire consumes the forest,  
as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Dabney, *Discussions Evangelical and Theological* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 1:715, quoted in Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” 113.

so may you pursue them with your tempest  
and terrify them with your hurricane!  
Fill their faces with shame,  
that they may seek your name, O LORD. (Ps 83:13-16)

Here, the purpose of the LORD's judgment is that the enemies might turn back to God in repentance. This, along with the introductory Psalm 2, suggests that there is a backdrop to prayers for judgment that should not be forgotten. The judgment the psalmists pray for may be a means by which God shakes his enemies out of their apathy and brings them to repentance.

But repentance might also *itself* be the way these prayers for judgment are answered. The prayers for judgment are all about asking God to punish sin, and—at their most extreme—to put the evildoer to death. They are asking God to judge justly. Yet this is precisely what happens when someone comes to faith in Christ. Their sins *are* punished—in a way more horrific than even the strongest language of judgment of the Psalter. These sins were punished on Christ at the cross. Moreover, conversion is described as a death experience. Conversion is dying with Christ (Rom 6:8). It is the death of the old self (Gal 2:20). So, when believers pray for judgment upon the wicked, it is left to the LORD whether this judgment falls on the wicked themselves (on judgment day if not also in this life) or whether that judgment falls on them *in Christ*.

Conversion may be one way in which God answers prayers for judgment from his people; but we should note the dominant emphasis in the Psalms is on asking for judgment, not praying for conversion. It is right that when God's people are persecuted, they are able to ask God to end the evil and punish the evildoers. The spirituality of the Psalms is not one where God's people look upon great wickedness and simply pray for the conversion of the perpetrators. They call God to act, to bear his arm, to break the teeth of the wicked, to rescue his people, and let justice be seen.

I have heard countless prayers in church praying for persecuted believers, and then praying for the conversion of those who persecute them. Yet if God chooses not to

bring about their conversion, are we happy to pray that God would judge justly, and put these evildoers to death and bring them to judgment? To pray in such a way should not encourage an arrogance, but rather fear and trembling as we realize that outside of Christ, we would deserve just the same judgment.

Luther puts it plainly:

We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends, and if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ. . . . We pray for our angry enemies, not that God protect and strengthen them in their ways, as we pray for Christians, or that He help them, but that they be converted, if they can be; or, if they refuse, that God oppose them, stop them and end the game to their harm and misfortune.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps, praying for judgment (as well as for conversions) would help remind the church of ultimate realities, would help break the church out of the secular worldview that thinks this life is all there is, and would help us cling more to our savior who is our only hope through the judgment to which all the judgments in the Psalms point.<sup>17</sup>

### **What about the New Testament?**

It might be argued that praying for judgment like the psalmists do is something that is peculiar to Old Testament religion but is inappropriate in the kingdom of Christ.<sup>18</sup> We think of Christ's teaching to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us. How does such teaching fit with these calls for judgment in the Psalms? C. Hassell

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 1100, quoted in Murray, "Christian Cursing?," 119.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ps 139:23-24, where after calling upon God to "slay the wicked" (v. 19) the psalmist asks God to search his own heart—perhaps both to guarantee that the psalmist's cries for judgment do not slip into ungodly anger, but also because the judgment the wicked will face is the same judgment the psalmist would face were it not for the forgiveness available from the LORD to all who confess their sins.

<sup>18</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), lxxxviii-lxxxix, quoted in Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 132.

Bullock poses the question,

The problem of the imprecatory psalms takes the form of an ethical question. How can one love one's enemies and pray at the same time that tragedy will suddenly strike them?<sup>19</sup>

### **Imprecatory Psalms Quoted in the New Testament**

It is striking that two of the strongest imprecatory psalms—which we have not yet considered—are both quoted approvingly by the New Testament.

Let their own table before them become a snare;  
and when they are at peace, let it become a trap.  
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble continually.  
Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one dwell in their tents.  
For they persecute him whom you have struck down,  
and they recount the pain of those you have wounded.  
Add to them punishment upon punishment;  
may they have no acquittal from you.  
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
let them not be enrolled among the righteous. (Ps 69:22-28)

These are some of the strongest words in the Psalter, yet Paul quotes from them in Romans, and Luke quotes from them in Acts.

In speaking of the Jews who have rejected Christ, Paul quotes from Psalm 69:22-23:

And David says,  
“Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and bend their backs forever.” (Rom 11:9-10)

At the very least, Paul is saying that David's prayer was an appropriate one to

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<sup>19</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 229.

pray, but it may even be that Paul is not simply saying that David's prayer has been answered, but he is joining in with it himself. Tom Schreiner notes, "Paul then prays for judgment (Psalm 69:22-23) over the Jews of his day who have rejected Christ."<sup>20</sup>

Luke sees Psalm 69:25 as having been fulfilled in the death of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus:

For it is written in the Book of Psalms,  
"May his camp become desolate,  
and let there be no one to dwell in it" (Acts 1:20)

Luke is not himself praying a prayer of judgment, but he sees the prayer of David as being entirely legitimate, one that God answered fully in the death of Judas. Later in Acts, Luke records the words of the apostles who saw the death of Christ as the supreme example of "Psalm 2" rebellion (Acts 4:24-28). In betraying Jesus, Judas was part of this "Psalm 2" rebellion against the LORD and his anointed, so it is entirely fitting that he should suffer the curses against God's "Psalm 2" enemies that David prayed for in Psalm 69. The implication is that God can be expected to continue to act in such a way against his enemies, and therefore that God's people might pray words such as Psalm 69 to this effect.<sup>21</sup> Psalm 109 is another prayer for judgment in very strong language, but Luke also applies this prayer to Judas in a similar way (Acts 1:20).

### **New Testament Imprecations**

Not only do New Testament authors quote from the imprecatory psalms, the New Testament itself has imprecations of its own.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Romans," in *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, Wayne Grudem, J. I. Packer et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2176.

<sup>21</sup> Bullock notes, "There seems to be no reason to think that the apostles looked at these psalms as exclusively messianic." Bullock, *Encountering the Psalms*, 230-31.

say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:8-9)

In the book of Revelation, the martyrs under the altar cry out for God to judge, using language very reminiscent of the Psalms:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign LORD, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:9-10)

In Romans, Paul urges his readers not to take vengeance, but rather to leave vengeance to the LORD, which is very similar to the dynamic of the imprecatory psalms:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the LORD.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Rom 12:19-20)

Pauls’ closing words to the Corinthians are very stark:

If anyone has no love for the LORD, let him be accursed. Our LORD, come! (1 Cor 16:22)

### **Christ and the Imprecations**

At times we may feel a tension between the words of Christ and the words of judgment found in the Psalms; but Christ himself was more explicit than anyone about the judgment that would come on the wicked. A recent Gospel Coalition article summarizes,

Jesus doesn’t only reference hell, he describes it in great detail. He says it is a place of eternal torment (Luke 16:23), of unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43), where the worm does not die (Mark 9:48), where people will gnash their teeth in anguish and regret (Matt 13:42), and from which there is no return, even to warn loved ones (Luke 16:19-31). He calls hell a place of “outer darkness” (Matt 25:30), comparing it to “Gehenna” (Matt 10:28), which was a trash dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was burned and maggots abounded. Jesus talks about hell more than he talks about heaven and describes it more vividly. There’s no denying that Jesus

knew, believed, and warned against the absolute reality of hell.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus' seven woes to the religious leaders in Matthew 23 are very strong language, but these hardly represent ungodly anger. Rather, they express righteous indignation against the evil of these powerful men who have used their power to oppress the weak. Jesus does not sit idly by and let them get away with it. He confronts evil and calls it out for what it is. But more than that, even in these stern condemnations, Jesus is giving these religious leaders an opportunity for repentance. Murray describes these woes as “loving warnings to them to repent before they were overtaken by these divine curses.”<sup>23</sup>

Jesus came to bring forgiveness and freedom, but he did this by binding the strong man so he could plunder his possessions (Mark 3:27). Jesus can only bring his kingdom by the defeat of evil. This defeat of evil is bound into the very heart of Christian prayer. As Luther put it, when someone prays “your kingdom come,”

He must put all the opposition to this in one pile and say: “Curses, maledictions and disgrace upon every other name and every other kingdom. May they be ruined and torn apart and may all their schemes and wisdom and plans run aground.”<sup>24</sup>

Far from turning aside from thoughts of judgment, Christ himself only intensified the warnings of the judgment to come. All the temporal judgments in Scripture—including those called for in the Psalms—are only pointers to the greater judgment to come when Christ returns in power and glory. So, it is right for Christian believers to see a spiritual dimension to the imprecations:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the

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<sup>22</sup> Leslie Schmucker, “The Uncomfortable Subject Jesus Addressed More than Anyone Else,” Gospel Coalition (blog), May 11, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-uncomfortable-subject-jesus-addressed-more-than-anyone-else/>.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” 116.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21:101, quoted in Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” 117.

authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)

But the imprecations should not be limited to this. They were applied to Judas himself, though a man, as he did the work of Satan. Satan will be defeated and punished as the ultimate enemy of Christ, but so will all who follow Satan in this rebellion (cf. Ps 2).

### **Conclusion**

Whatever difficulties we have with the imprecatory psalms, these difficulties cannot be solved by simply discounting them as being “Old Testament religion,”<sup>25</sup> as the New Testament has very similar language and ideas. The New Testament presents the good news in more detail and color than the Old Testament, as grace and truth were fully made known in Jesus Christ. But the judgments that the Old Testament describes are also amplified in the New Testament, with Jesus himself warning more than anyone else about the horrors of hell and condemnation.

It is striking that one of the New Testament letters that speaks most directly to how to relate to those who oppose Christians—1 Peter—takes its prime ethical section directly from the Psalms: Psalm 34. Christians are never to take revenge, or to return evil for evil. We are called to bless, not curse, and to do good even to those who sin against us. But we are also to call on God to keep his gospel promises, to fully and finally crush the serpent, to curse all who curse the offspring of Abraham, and to restrain wickedness so that God’s people can be delivered. In the New Testament, just as in the Old, salvation is always in the context of judgment. This is seen in one of the central prayers of the Christian faith: your kingdom come. What does this mean other than Christ putting his enemies under his feet? Some, like the apostle Paul, are conquered and brought into his

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<sup>25</sup> Kirkpatrick says the imprecatory psalms “must be viewed as belonging to the dispensation of the Old Testament . . . they belong to the spirit of Elijah, not of Christ.” Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, ixxxviii-lxxxix, quoted in Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 132.



kingdom as converts. Others, like Judas, are conquered solely in judgment. But either way, if rightly understood, prayers for God to judge justly are entirely appropriate, letting him determine exactly how he will answer them.

The imprecations are some of the hardest psalms to understand, indeed some of the hardest Scriptures to understand. But we should remember they are not the dominant note of the Psalter. And even when we do have remaining questions, we should seek to follow the counsel of Spurgeon: “Truly this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read, yet it is not ours to sit in judgment upon it, but to bow our ear to what the Lord would speak to us therein.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), 2a:436, quoted in Murray, “Christian Cursing?,” 121.

## CHAPTER 9

### CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

So far, we have argued against the view that Christ should be seen as the only speaker of each psalm. But such a reading hardly omits Christ from the Psalms. If we read the Psalms carefully, we see so many themes and truths that find their fulfilment in Christ.

Christ is the true king in the line of David, and so is pointed to in that way by psalms that speak of the king, which is the subject of another chapter. But even when the emphasis is not on the Davidic king, every single psalm still testifies to Christ, often in many and varied ways. He is God, he is savior, he is the faithful—and often suffering—believer.

#### **Christ as LORD God**

Though much ink may be spilled over the identity of the human speaker of the Psalms, the main character in the Psalms is not in doubt: it is not the human speaker but God himself. As we have seen, the Psalms contain a rich and profound doctrine of God. As Christians it is natural to see Christ as the fulfilment of all these words; Christ who is the image of the invisible God, who most fully reveals God to us, and in whose life and ministry so many of the themes of the Psalms find even deeper fulfilment.

#### **Christ as Creator**

Bless the LORD, O my soul!  
O LORD my God, you are very great!  
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,  
covering yourself with light as with a garment,  
stretching out the heavens like a tent.  
He set the earth on its foundations,

so that it should never be moved. (Ps 104:1-2, 5)

Psalm 104 is a long and vivid psalm describing God's glory in his creation, which leads all people to praise him. Yet Christians have a further perspective: creation is not simply *through* Christ, but *for* him.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Col 1:16)

Psalms that speak of God as creator, or of the wonders of creation can easily point us to Christ, through whom and for whom all things exist.

### **Christ as the God Who Is Mighty Yet Close**

The Psalms regularly celebrate God's greatness, yet intermingle this with the seemingly contradictory truth that God is close and cares intimately for his people:

He heals the brokenhearted  
and binds up their wounds.  
He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.  
Great is our LORD, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.  
The LORD lifts up the humble;  
he casts the wicked to the ground. (Ps 147:3-6)

Surely it is in Christ that God's majestic power and personal care are most clearly seen! Christ drove out the demon with a strong word, yet immediately afterwards healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law with no words, just a gentle and tender touch (Mark 1:21-31).

As we will see, some psalms begin to point to not just a God who is both mighty and compassionate, but who even stoops down and humbles himself:

Who is like the LORD our God,  
Who is enthroned on high,  
*Who humbles Himself* to behold [emphasis added]  
The things that are in heaven and in the earth?  
He raises the poor from the dust

And lifts the needy from the ash heap, (Ps 113:5-7 New American Standard Bible)

Can we read such words and not think of our savior, who “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9)?

### **Christ as the God Who Is with Us**

God’s covenant with his people underpins so much of the experience of believers in the Psalms. One covenant promise that the psalmists celebrate is God’s promise to be with his people.

The LORD is my shepherd . . . .

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me; (Ps 23:1a, 4a)

How can we read these verses and not be pointed to our good shepherd, Jesus Christ, who is not only with us in the valley of the shadow of death, but tasted death itself, laying his life down for his sheep?

The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Ps 46:7)

In Psalm 46 God’s people are encouraged and strengthened by the presence of God with them. How much more as Christians do we know these words to be true through Christ whose very name is Immanuel: God with us!

### **Jesus Achieved the Great Salvation to Which the Psalms Point**

The Psalms are full of descriptions of God’s saving activity, whether in our individual times of distress, or in the great actions of salvation in history. The Psalms present God as “my rock and my redeemer” (Ps 19:14).

The exodus is a hugely dominant theme in the Psalms, never far below the surface. The exodus is the defining salvation event in the Old Testament. Present deliverances from distress are described in exodus language, linking them to the character

of God who saves. In trials, the psalmists look back to the exodus as proof of God's character and trustworthiness. In both of these, the assumption is that God's character has not changed, and so the God of the exodus is still with his people and will still save them.

For God's Old Testament people, the exodus was the dominant picture of salvation. But for Christians it is the cross of Christ that looms large over the whole New Testament. At the cross Christ achieved the decisive victory over sin, Satan, and death—a victory that is consistently described in exodus language. Christ died at Passover time, as the Passover lamb (John 13:1). His death achieved redemption from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13).

So, any reference to salvation in the Psalms—whether small or big—should lead us to consider the cross of Christ. To do so is not to read something into the text that is not there—rather it is to follow how the Bible authors link these things to the big deliverance of the exodus which finds its truest fulfilment in the death of Christ.

### **Looking Back to God's Great Deliverance**

The Psalms encourage believers in distress to look back to God's mighty acts of redemption in history, to reassure themselves of God's goodness and character.

Will the LORD spurn forever,  
and never again be favorable?  
Has his steadfast love forever ceased?  
Are his promises at an end for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion? *Selah*

Then I said, "I will appeal to this,  
to the years of the right hand of the Most High."

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your wonders of old. (Ps 77:7-11)

As Christians, *how much more* can we look back to God's supreme act of deliverance at the cross, as a proof that God is for us, and will not abandon us (cf. Rom

8:32). Psalm 77 is a precious gift to us as Christians, even more powerful than it was for Old Testament believers. “I will remember the deeds of the LORD” means so much more for us than it did for the psalmist; when we are tempted to doubt God’s grace or compassion, we can say “I will remember the cross of Christ!”

### **Using Psalms to Ponder the Cross**

Because of these connections, we can let every account of deliverance in the Psalms—whether big or small, personal or corporate—serve as a window through which to meditate on the glories of Christ’s death for us:

I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
He drew me up from the pit of destruction,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.  
He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God. (Ps 40:1-3)

Every time we read of deliverance or salvation language in the Psalms, this points us to our great redeemer, Jesus Christ. If understood this way, we can barely read one or two psalms before we are pointed again to the cross of Christ! But this is never boring, as each psalm gives a different perspective on our LORD as deliverer, and on a salvation that is so glorious that we need hundreds of different songs and metaphors and images to even come close to capturing its wonder. By contrast, if we do not let the Psalms teach us of the cross of Christ, we are robbed of some of the most powerful and heart-capturing images of this salvation:

For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling;  
I will walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living. (Ps 116:8-9)

## **Steadfast Love**

Closely linked to the theme of God being a redeemer is the Psalm's emphasis on God's "steadfast love"—*hesed*. God's steadfast love is his *covenant* love, his love which caused him to bring his people out of Egypt and bring them to himself. When the Psalms speak of "steadfast love" this is often alluding back to God's words to Moses in Exodus 34:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod 34:6-7)

This glorious revelation of God's character contains within it a tension; how can God be merciful and gracious, yet not leave sins unpunished? How can God's love both be free and undeserved, yet a just love that does not condone sin? This is only resolved in the cross of Christ, where sin is punished, and forgiveness purchased. It is only at the cross that we truly see how, in the words of Psalm 85:10,

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

It was God's steadfast love that is demonstrated in Christ dying on the cross for us (Rom 5:8). When the Psalms speak of "steadfast love" it is only right that we think of the cross of Christ, where we see this love most clearly displayed.

### **Christ the Faithful (and Often Suffering) Believer**

In an earlier chapter I argued that the singer/speaker of the Psalms should *not* be seen as Christ and Christ alone. To do this would not only be to read the Psalms in a different way to which they were originally intended, but also would prevent some of the ways of being pointed to Christ in the Psalms that I have just mentioned.

But even when David is not speaking as king, or the psalmist is a member of

the community, this does not mean these words cannot be seen as belonging to Christ. Jesus is not only king, but also the model believer—as the king in the Old Testament was always intended to be.

Christ in his humanity entered into every single human experience, apart from sin. So, in the Psalms when we read of believers in distress from sickness, enemies, betrayal, even death, we are right to see these as pointing to the experience of Christ. These are not the experiences that are *only* true of Christ—rather they are experiences true of all believers, including Christ!

So, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spoke of his soul being “very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt 26:38) perhaps alluding to Psalm 13:

How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day? (Ps 13:2)

On the cross, Jesus cried out in the words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1).

Every cry of sorrow or distress in the Psalms can be heard as the words of Christ. Some sorrows he suffered for the same reasons the psalmists did: because he lived in a world where people hate God, his king, and his people. Some sorrows the psalmists face are of their own making, due to their sin. We do not see these words as directly on Jesus’ lips, as he never sinned. But as he bore our sins, he experienced *all* the devastating consequences of sin.

David speaks of how he suffered when he harbored unrepentant sin:

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. (Ps 32:3-4)

Jesus knew this groaning, he knew the heavy hand of the LORD upon him, but for *our* sins, not for his own!

It is not just the laments, but also the songs of thanksgiving and trust that we



can hear on Jesus' lips:

I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: (Ps 22:22; cf. Heb 2:12)

I have argued that David is often presented himself as an exemplar of faith; but in doing so he points ahead to *the* great example of faith: Jesus Christ himself. This is true for David's praises, his thanksgiving, his trust—and indeed that of the other psalmists. In the experience of the faithful psalmists, we are given a wonderful window into the humanity of Jesus Christ, who is the faithful believer par excellence.

### **Conclusion**

There is a nice simplicity to saying that Christ is the singer (and only singer) of every psalm. But such a view actually restricts how we see Christ in the Psalms—as well as restricting the use of the Psalms by Christian believers today. There is a richness to the Psalms that we must not seek to curtail.

A right desire to see Christ in the Psalms must not turn into a “Where’s Waldo” approach, where the goal is simply to find Christ, without paying proper attention to the Psalms themselves. Nor must any method we use become a sort of procrustean bed that ends up doing violence to the original purpose of the Psalms. Rather, if we really believe Jesus when he says that the Old Testament Scriptures “testify about me,” we will look at the Psalms on their own terms and see that they *all* point to Christ, and in many and various ways.

The subjective use of the Psalms, where Christians appropriate the words of the Psalmist as their own, does not lead to a Christ-less reading of the Psalms—far from it! Christ is the LORD of whom the Psalms speak, he achieved the deliverance they celebrate, he underwent the trials they portray, he is the king they proclaim. Sometimes we find more than one of these in the same psalm! The Psalms give us a myriad of ways to celebrate and delight in our LORD, Savior and brother, Jesus Christ!

## CHAPTER 10

### HOW TO PRAISE

The Bible is full of commands to praise the LORD. Arguably the command to praise is the most often repeated in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Adam and Eve were created for worship. Israel were redeemed from Egypt for worship (Exod 4:23). The call to praise is at its highest in the Psalms.

Yet if we are honest, praise is not always the default position of our hearts. We often feel the exuberant melodies of the psalmist are beyond us, and we feel hard-hearted, or at least lethargic in our praise. What are we to make of the praise psalms? Are these burdens that are laid on us? Are these words to condemn us for how far we fall short of the example of David and others? And if we feel our praise is lacking, if we long for more enthusiasm for God and his ways, what is the solution?

The praise psalms are one significant remedy God has given us for this spiritual lethargy. They are not meant to burden or condemn. Nor do they portray a praise that is only the privilege of the spiritual elite. Nor even—as we shall see—are they only for use when we feel like praising in this way, as they can help *shape* as well as express our praise.

The reason the praise psalms help us in this way is because—although we are calling them praise psalms—the dominant note in these psalms is not, in fact, praise in and of itself; the dominant note is *God*. The call to praise is always accompanied by *reasons* to praise—reasons that direct our attention to God, his character, and his ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Bloom, “The Most Repeated Command in the Bible,” *Desiring God* (blog), November 21, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-most-repeated-command-in-the-bible>.

This structure is seen most clearly in the shortest of all psalms, Psalm 117, with a call to praise (v. 1) followed by reasons to praise (v. 2):

Praise the LORD, all nations!  
Extol him, all peoples!

For great is his steadfast love toward us,  
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

Praise the LORD! (Ps 117)

We will explore more of the call to praise and the reasons for praise as we look at a model praise psalm, Psalm 113.

### **The Call to Praise**

Praise the LORD!  
Praise, O servants of the LORD,  
praise the name of the LORD!

Blessed be the name of the LORD  
from this time forth and forevermore!  
From the rising of the sun to its setting,  
the name of the LORD is to be praised! (Ps 113:1-3)

Psalm 13 begins with a call to praise that is bold and universal. The word *praise* is used five times. The LORD is to be praised at all times: “both now and forevermore,” and in all places “from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.” What is not clear from our English translations is that the word *praise* is a plural command: “praise ye the LORD” as older translations have it. All God’s people—his servants—are called to praise him. The psalm concludes with another call to “praise the LORD.”

Yet even in this call to praise, there is a hint of why God’s people are to praise him. It is because of his “name”—his character. He is the LORD—Yahweh—the covenant name of God that he revealed to his people in Exodus 3. This is the name by which his people know him, which speaks of his covenant promises and faithfulness, and his

deliverance of his people.

The call to praise is not because there are threats if the people do not praise. He is not a tyrant who demands worship with the threat of his power; nor is God to be praised simply because he is the only God and therefore the only one who might be praised. He is to be praised because he is *worthy* of praise. His very being and character are praiseworthy.

Even before the psalm moves to elaborate on the reasons for praise, the very command “Praise the LORD” directs our attention up to the one who is praiseworthy. But as we move to the second part of the psalm, we see its real heart. This is not so much a praise psalm, as a *God*-psalm.

### **Reasons for Praise**

Different psalms give different reasons for praise. God is praised for his creation, for his rule, for his work in Israel’s history, and for his wondrous deeds.<sup>2</sup> But in Psalm 113 we see two emphases that recur throughout the Psalms: God’s transcendence and his immanence.

#### **God’s Transcendence**

The LORD is high above all nations,  
and his glory above the heavens!  
Who is like the LORD our God,  
who is seated on high,  
who looks far down  
on the heavens and the earth? (Ps 113:4-6)

Verses 4-6 are full of words denoting height and greatness. He is exalted high above all nations, his glory is above the heavens. He is seated—which no doubt means enthroned—on high. And he looks far down on the heavens and earth—indicating again

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<sup>2</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 126.

just how high and exalted he is.

This is known as God's transcendence. He is not a small God. He is not like us. Indeed, this was a recurring problem for the people of Israel—they thought that God was like them (Ps 50:21). But in fact, he is greater than we can imagine. The psalmist here uses spatial language to convey something of God's power and might. He is not only so much greater than we are, but he is also the unchallenged ruler. His throne is on high. He has no rivals. He has no equals. Well might the psalmist say, "Who is like the LORD our God?" The answer is clear: no one.

This is the God who dwells in unapproachable light. This is the God who determines times and seasons, who governs all of creation with his powerful word. This is the God who brings kingdoms and princes to nothing, who weighs nations as if they were the dust on the scales.

The psalmist's question "who is like the LORD our God" is an invitation to gaze on infinite power and might, to flood our minds with the grandeur of this king. This is an invitation to feel very small, and to put aside small thoughts of God. The LORD is so much bigger than we might think. So much more exalted. So much more powerful. So much more transcendent.

It is common among Christians today to minimize God's transcendence. We are very good at talking of God's love, God's nearness, God's closeness. But that only makes sense and receives its full power when we understand his otherness. He is the God who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no-one can see. He is so different, so great, he is exalted above the heavens, above the stars. His understanding is without limit. Like he says to Job, "Were you there when I created all these things? Can you determine the number of the stars or can you number these things?" He is so much bigger.

Only when we have that in our minds, does the psalmist move on to speak of this God's closeness. Only once we have seen God's staggering power—that in the wrong hands would be utterly terrifying—does the psalmist speak of how God uses this

power.

### **God's Closeness**

He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes,  
with the princes of his people.  
He gives the barren woman a home,  
making her the joyous mother of children.  
Praise the LORD! (Ps 113:7-9)

After verses focusing on God being “high,” now our gaze is brought down low: to the poor, the needy, the ash heap, the barren woman—those of low status, with no influence, no significance in the world’s eyes, no future. The mighty king of all the universe, enthroned above the heavens, is found showing care and compassion to the lowest of the low. The one who stretched out the heavens and knows the names of 70 billion trillion stars is also the one who knows the name of the beggar, the refugee, the lonely. How does God treat such people? He lifts them, he raises them. He gives them joy for ashes, he gives honor where there was shame, he gives a community, and a future where there was barrenness and no hope.

Throughout the Bible we see God’s care for just such as these. There are similarities with Hannah’s experience (1 Sam 2) which is itself a picture of the experience of the nation. She was one who was barren, and she was miraculously given a child—like many other barren women in Scripture. Of course, this literal provision of a child is not always God’s means of working. Under the new covenant God still shows particular care to those who suffer the painful tears of childlessness, but even if he does not give literal children, he gives the church (Mark 10:29-30). The church is to be a family of those who love and care for each other. God’s particular greatness in this psalm is not seen in the grand cosmic events, but at the bedside of the sick, in lives of those the world has left broken and ashamed.

## God's Descent

Yet this has not exhausted all the references to “high” and “low” in the psalm. An alternative translation is possible for verse 6. The Hebrew that underlies our translation “who looks far down” actually contains two verbs and could be rendered “who stoops down to look” (NIV). When this first verb is used elsewhere in the Psalms, it is used to refer to God casting down the wicked:

For you save a humble people,  
but the haughty eyes *you bring down* [emphasis added]. (Ps 18:27)

but it is God who executes judgment,  
*putting down* one and lifting up another [emphasis added]. (Ps 75:7)

The LORD lifts up the humble;  
*he casts* the wicked to the ground [emphasis added]. (Ps 147:6)

The LORD stoops—or casts himself down—in order to look on the poor and needy and lift them. Verse 6 is the bridge between the two parts of the psalm. The one who is so high stoops down low, in order to lift up the poor and needy.

It is hard to read these verses and not think of our savior Jesus Christ as the one who most fully displays this. He is high and exalted. Yet he stoops down and becomes low, so that he can lift up those who are poor and needy and bring them up to positions of honor and glory. This is what God has always been like. Even God's Old Testament people could begin to see the character of their God revealed.

In one sense, the incarnation was not something surprising. Jesus' humbling himself to death on the cross was not a departure from our LORD's normal character. It was in fact the most clear expression of his character: how he always has been, is, and ever shall be. The apostle Paul could have been thinking of this psalm when he wrote:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

This was seen throughout Jesus's life as he gave time and honor to those who

were looked down on by others: sinners, women, foreigners, the sick, the poor. This was seen in Jesus's death as he came to deal with humanity's greatest poverty and shame. And it can still be seen in the church today, as through his body on earth, Christ continues to minister to those who are weak, frail, and vulnerable.

No wonder the psalm concludes with a call to praise! The psalmist invites those reading, praying, or singing the psalm to gaze at the majestic transcendence, but also personal and costly care of our LORD. God is tender, and he is mighty. Let these truths lift your heart in adoration. Great power is a terrifying thing in the wrong hands. We have seen that too well in world news in recent years. How does the LORD use his power? He uses it consistently to heal the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds. If you are feeling fragile, if you fear that you might almost be at breaking point, the LORD will not break you. Though he made everything, his care is tender.

## **Application**

### **Our Duty and Our Joy**

We should not see the repeated calls to praise in Scripture as a burden. Nor should we see the extravagant praise of the psalmists as something to condemn us for falling short of their standard. The Psalms of praise are a gift to us. They call us to a praise that is—in the words of the Church of England Eucharistic prayer—“our duty and *our joy*.”<sup>3</sup> Praise is our joy because of where this praise is focused: God himself.

This wholehearted praise is what we were made for. Psalm 147 captures something of the joy of praise:

Praise the LORD!  
For it is good to sing praises to our God;

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<sup>3</sup> From the Church of England Communion Service, Order Two in Contemporary Language. Church of England, *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* (London: Church House, 2000), 259.



for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. (Ps 147:1)

It is good to praise; praise is pleasant. This command to praise is not a burden laid on us by the LORD, but a gift. In commanding us to praise, God is telling us the best way to live. It is not that praise in and of itself is good—not a form of positive thinking, looking on the bright side. The value of praise depends on its object. Praise is good, because it is the celebrating of the character of the LORD who is good! This is captured in an alternate reading of Psalm 147:1, expressed in the ESV footnote:

Praise the LORD!  
For it is good to sing praises to our God;  
for *he is beautiful* [emphasis added], and a song of praise is fitting. (Ps 147:1)

Praising God is so good because he is so beautiful. It is not a burden when a curator in an art gallery directs our attention to the most splendid painting in their collection.

We all worship something. We seek what is valuable and praise it. If it's not God, it's something else. This is where so many problems come from, when we elevate something other than God to this position. Praise on its own is of no value, unless the thing being praised is valuable. Christian praise is a good thing because it is a celebration of the character of God—and he is infinitely good and beautiful and worthy of our contemplation.

### **Doctrine and Doxology**

The praise psalms show us that true praise is always the response of our hearts to knowledge of God. If we feel our praise is weak, if we feel our hearts are cold towards the LORD, the answer is not to look within, but to look up to him. Praise is never something that we summon up by an act of will, or we simply grit our teeth and try to produce. Praise is always *response*. Greater knowledge of him will lead to an overflowing of praise from within us. And so, the psalmist elaborates just what is so wonderful about the LORD that makes praising him such a delight.

The praise psalms are full of the doctrine of God. You could teach a systematic theology from the praise psalms. They are so God centered and have such a big view of God. When we lack wonder or joy or delight, the praise psalms point us away from the state of our hearts and point us up to God. Biblically speaking, doctrine is never dry and dusty. It is loud and joyful! We need to hold together what Scripture holds together. If we are simply trying to manipulate a sense of praise, without any basis in truths about God, this is not a Christian spirituality. But knowing truths about God but never letting these truths fire our hearts in worship is also woefully short of the example of the psalmists. Our Christian lives—and indeed our church services—should always combine doctrine and doxology.

Christian spirituality is not a “ladder spirituality” where we try to work our way towards God by the religious practices we perform. Christian spirituality is *responsive*. Our worship, our praise, our whole Christian life, is a response to the person and work of our LORD. By their structure, the praise psalms emphasize this truth again and again.

If we feel lethargic, cold-hearted, or joyless, there can be no greater remedy than flooding our hearts with thoughts of the beauty, the majesty, and the grandeur of our God.

### **The Formative Nature of Praise**

But the Psalms do not merely correct our thinking. Many Christians would get high marks in a quiz with questions about the greatness and power of God. But we so often fail to live as if God really is this great and powerful. What we know in our head has not yet penetrated our heart and become a meaningful part of how we live our lives. The praise psalms speak of God’s greatness, power, and majesty in ways that fire our emotions, and help us not simply to believe, but to *love* and to *live* these truths.

Joining the psalmists in praise of God helps us to take to heart truths that we

know in our heads. When we praise God, and lift our souls to him, this helps us to delight in the truths of God and know him better. Praising God helps us to enjoy him more. As C. S. Lewis said, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is its appointed consummation.”<sup>4</sup>

When we see something beautiful, we want to tell others. Maybe you have seen something beautiful: a sunset, a view, a painting. We want to share this with others, and in so doing, we come to enjoy the thing even more.

So too when we praise God. Praise is not simply magnifying God, it is preaching to our soul. It is also a call to others to join in. Praise is a corporate activity, as God’s people together celebrate the LORD and his ways. It is even a missional activity. As we dwell on the goodness and greatness of our God, we want others to come to know him too. And as we lift our hearts to him, and turn our eyes away from all the other treasures of this world, the unbelieving world around us will be led to ask what gives us this perspective—what is it we worship—or rather *who* is it we worship that can make us so different.

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<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 97.

## CHAPTER 11

### HOW TO LAMENT

On Friday a mother watches her young son take his final breath. Then on Sunday she is in church and called to praise the LORD, the very one who took her son from her. A year draws to an end and nations and churches reflect on the 12 months that have passed. Earthquakes, floods, fatal shootings, terrorist bombs at pop concerts, women and children trafficked into modern slavery. How can the church worship in light of these things?

Being a Christian is not always easy. Coming to Christ does not remove us from the pain and sorrow of the world. Yet many western Christians feel ill-equipped for engaging with God in the harder times. Perhaps our church feels very upbeat. Perhaps most of our songs seem to give a vision of the Christian life that is all joy and gladness. Perhaps when we struggle, we feel that this is something we cannot bring to church, or even bring to God. So, we stay at home until life gets easier. Or we put our best ‘church face’ on and pretend.

In the lament psalms we see that we do not need to pretend like this. In these psalms we see believers engaging with God in the storms of life. To lament is to pour out one’s soul to the LORD and ask him to answer—to cry out about the sufferings and hardships we face. The problems the psalmists complain about include enemies, sickness, national disasters, loneliness, even the LORD himself. Their cries are bold and honest. Every time a lament was sung in the Israelite congregation, this would have been incredibly powerful for those who were struggling. They would see that brokenness and heartache were permitted in the congregation of God’s people. They would learn words to cry out to God, even when their words failed them. They would have the worshipping

community move towards them in their struggles—not trying to fix them but crying out with them to the LORD. Carl Trueman comments, “In the Psalms, God has given the church a language which allows it to express even the deepest agonies of the human soul in the context of worship.”<sup>1</sup>

The lament psalms teach us to bring our trials to the LORD—to move towards him in times of trouble, rather than move away. In the lament psalms we find words to pray when we do not know what to pray. When we suffer, we find prayer very hard. In her study on lament psalms Tara Stenhouse points out how pain and suffering take language from us:

Why do we not have the words to express our pain? Part of the reason seems to be that there is an absence of talking about and expressing our pain in our society and the church, as mentioned earlier, but also—and more deeply—because pain is inherently language shattering. It takes our words away. Pain and suffering suppress us at the deepest level, including our voice. . . . It follows that in the midst of pain and suffering there is a need for the reality of our pain to be expressed. It is greatly comforting to have the words of the psalm to help one understand what one is feeling and thinking.<sup>2</sup>

In his grace, the LORD does not just speak *to* us in Scripture, he also gives us words to speak back to him. This was my own experience after the death of my mother, when I found it very hard to pray. In the words of the Psalms I found words to express the confused anguish of my heart. It was as if in the Psalms the LORD said, “Let me pray for you.”

### **The Pattern of Lament Psalms**

The psalm that best illustrates the typical pattern of lament is Psalm 13. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Trueman, “What Can Miserable Christians Sing?,” in *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings on Historical and Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 159-60.

<sup>2</sup> Tara J. Stenhouse, “The Psalms of Lament in the Experience of Suffering Christians,” in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, ed. Andrew G. Shead (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2013), 188-89.

also the most general lament—one that could be used in many different situations. It is the psalm I have used most often in pastoral situations with people who are struggling, whether through bereavement, sickness, unemployment, or anything else.

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;  
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,  
lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”  
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps 13)

### **The Address**

This psalm, like so many other laments, addresses God at the start: “O LORD.” The address is important as it frames everything. Before beginning his complaint, the psalmist makes it clear who he is speaking to, and what his relationship to God is.

**Reverence.** To cry “O LORD” is a reverent way of beginning the psalm. The psalmist is not shaking his fist at God. He is not sitting in judgment on God. He is aware that God is his LORD. This address is part of what distinguishes what the psalmists are doing from simply complaining or grumbling. In the wilderness, having been brought out of Egypt, the people complained about God for his treatment of them. They grumbled “in the hearing of the LORD” (Num 11:1). As a result, they were put to death. Grumbling is a serious sin in Scripture. The address of this lament psalm is very different. Rather than complaining *about* God, the psalmist brought his concerns *to* God. In any situation we

have a choice of whether to turn towards God, or away from him. The psalmist brought his distress to God. And he brought it to God as his LORD, with reverence.

**Boldness.** But there is great boldness and confidence in crying “O LORD.” The word rendered “LORD” in our English translations is the name of God that he revealed to Moses as he brought the people of Israel out of Egypt (Exod 3:14-15). It is God’s covenant name, God’s saving name, the one that represents his *relationship* with his people:

I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exod 6:7)

When the psalmist cries out “O LORD” he is remembering and claiming the covenant promises of God. What gives him the right to cry out to God with such confidence? What gives him the right to speak as boldly as he does in the rest of the psalm? The answer is God’s covenant promise. To cry “O LORD” is already to give reasons why God should answer the request: God has made extraordinary promises to his people, one of them being that he will hear and answer prayer.

How much more as Christians can we approach God with confidence. Jesus taught us to pray “Our Father,” which is a reverent address, but also a bold one. We come to God as children—not those who command God as one commands a servant. But we come as *his* children—deeply loved, to whom glorious promises have been made.

### **Telling God the Problem**

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps 13:1-2)

“How long?” cries David. This is a characteristic cry of the Psalms, occurring 22 times in the book, but here it is repeated four times quickly, with intensity. It is not so

much an academic question that requires an answer, but a cry of anguish. David wants God to change his situation. David knows God's promises to be with his people and bless them, but what he experiences is the opposite of this; God not paying him attention, not turning his face towards him in blessing. David looks at his situation and the promises of God; he sees that they do not match, so he calls on the LORD to act, not to let this situation go on forever.

**Ambiguity.** David does not tell us exactly what the situation is, but it is a serious one. Sorrow in his heart all the day. The seeming absence of God. An enemy opposing him. David may be referring to a literal enemy with sword and spear, or this may be a metaphor for his situation: a personification of the trial. We do not know the details, but perhaps we know these feelings. As we saw in the chapter on poetry, these are words that could be used in a range of different situations. If David was so specific like "how long must I suffer Absalom's attacks?" no one else could use those words. The deliberate ambiguity of the Psalms is an invitation for others to use the words of the psalmist for their own situations of trial.

**Honesty.** There is a brutal honesty to the cries of lament in the Psalms. The psalmists do not try to pretend that everything is fine. They do not cover up their problems in super-spiritual language. Their cries are raw and very bold.<sup>3</sup> There is no nuance, no qualification. We might imagine a well-meaning friend telling him "God hasn't *actually* forgotten about you. God hasn't completely hidden his face: you still have

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<sup>3</sup> The language here of God "hiding his face" is strong, but it is used elsewhere in Scripture: "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him" (Isa 8:17). God hiding his face is the opposite of him turning his face towards his people in blessing (cf. Num 6:25-26.) God's people no longer know his blessing and favor. In Isaiah, God hides his face due to his people's sin; here (and in Ps 44) the psalmist speaks of God's hidden face that is *not* due to the people's sin, which makes it all the more perplexing.



life and breath and *so many* blessings from God.” But that is not the point. God does not tell David that he can’t cry out to him until he gets his language completely accurate. This is how David feels, and this is how God encourages him to pray.<sup>4</sup> “The presence of these prayers in the Psalter indicates at least that God gives permission for them to be prayed.”<sup>5</sup>

When a child has been playing in the garden, their parents might ask them to wash their hands and put on some clean clothes before they come to the dinner table. But sometimes as Christians we feel we need to do similar to approach the LORD. First, we need to get ourselves cleaned up, and only then can we come to him.

But that is not what we see in this psalm. David doesn’t need to get his theology completely straight. He doesn’t need to be in complete control of his emotions before he opens his mouth. He doesn’t need to have the full picture before he can pray. Of course, there will be more to say. But in these inspired psalms, God is teaching us that we can come to him as we are.

The address has framed things. “O LORD” means we come not as a master commanding a servant, but more like that child who is utterly dependent on his or her parents. But within this place of security, we then pour out our hearts, telling God how it feels. God is far more accessible than we dare to believe. As Christians we have even more reason to think our prayers will be heard, as we pray in union with Christ, to our heavenly Father. We can pray with confidence and great boldness, just like David does

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin speaks of similar language in Ps 44, noting that the psalmists would only cry out about God’s hidden face if they actually at some level believed God was turned towards them to listen. Far from criticizing such imperfect language, “God allows the saints to plead with him in this babbling manner.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 1:171. Calvin sees the use of such strong language as how believers can “discharge from their breasts those morbid affections which belong to the corruption of our nature, in consequence of which faith then shines forth in its pure and native character” (1:171).

<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, *Songs from a Strange Land: Psalms 42-51*, Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 1978), 23.

here.

### **Asking God to Answer**

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;  
light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,  
lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"  
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. (Ps 13:3-4)

After telling God the problem, the psalmist calls on God to answer. Notice how there are very few specifics here. "Look on me!" "Answer!" "Give light to my eyes!" David wants the LORD to act on his behalf. But he doesn't say very much about exactly what he wants the LORD to do. In the laments, the psalmists spend far more time describing the problem and how it feels than describing what they want God to do. This is an important lesson for Christians as we pray.

Many prayers resemble a sort of a to-do list: "please do this and this and this." But biblically the psalmists just pour out the situation to God and ask him to act. It is the difference between delegating to a junior and passing a problem to someone senior. In the workplace, when you delegate to a junior you are very specific about what needs to be done, and how. You have the wisdom and experience, so you are overall in charge. You figure out the solution to the problem, and then hand out specific tasks to make sure it gets done.

But when a problem comes across our desk that is above our paygrade, we seek the help of someone more senior, with more wisdom and experience. We tell them the problem, but we don't then itemize how to fix it. That's the issue: we don't know how to fix it! We simply say what the problem is. We say, "This has happened. This is beyond my capacity. I wouldn't even be able to know what a solution begins to look like in this situation. Here's what's going on, please can you deal with it?"

Which of these should our prayers be more like? Delegating to God by telling him exactly how to solve each problem? Or simply describing the problem and trusting to

his ability to provide the solution?

We all know times when we struggle to pray. Perhaps a situation is so complex, or so emotionally overwhelming that we do not know what to ask God for. I have known that in my own life, and when I have met with others from church who are struggling. What a freedom to be able to use the words of Psalm 13, to pour out the situation before the LORD and then simply to say, “LORD, please answer! Look upon them! Give light to their eyes! Do not hide your face.” Even when we do not know what to pray for, we can still pray rich biblical prayers. Perhaps we might use the psalm-inspired prayer of king Jehoshaphat; in a time of deep distress when Judah was surrounded by armies, after laying out the situation before God, he simply prayed, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you” (2 Chr 20:12).

**Christian lament.** We still live in a fallen world. Lament is just as much part of a Christian’s experience as it was an Old Testament Israelite’s. If anything, Christians have an even greater sense of dislocation, of not being at home in the world. We suffer not simply the normal struggles of living in a broken world, but also persecutions for belonging to Christ. The astonishing promises we have in Christ do not negate the real trials that God’s people can undergo in this world.

Not only do Christ’s people still lament, but Christ himself was a man of sorrows. In the words of the laments we see his own experience: persecuted, abandoned, suffering, betrayed. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as the horrors of the cross loomed over him, Jesus cried out in anguish using words echoing Psalm 13, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt 26:38). As he hung on the cross, Jesus found words for his experience in the lament of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1)

Language like “God why have you turned your face away” which we use in a partial, limited sense to describe our experience of how things feel, for Christ become

true in the deepest sense—he really was forsaken by God and abandoned by him on account of our sins.

The laments are words given to us to engage with God in our times of distress. But as we do, we can know the comfort that we do not suffer alone. Christ experienced all this. He lived a fully human life. Though he never suffered on account of his own sin—as the psalmists do on occasion—he did suffer all the consequences of sin. He is a merciful and faithful high priest, who is able to sympathize with our weakness (Heb 4:16).

### **Affirmation of Trust**

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (Ps 13:5-6)

There is a striking change in the tone of the psalm in verses 5-6. The first four verses have been full of anguish, but the last two verses express trust and confidence. Some suggest that there is a progression here, or that something has happened between the two sections, maybe the arrival of some good news. But other lament psalms have much more of a blend of both anguish and trust. I am much more persuaded that David is lamenting and crying out but *also* saying “but I trust.” Like the apostle Paul, David is “sorrowful yet always rejoicing.” This is true Christian experience.

David does not let his very real doubts and anguish cancel out his trust in God’s promise. David doesn’t forget all he knows about God as he is suffering. Even though the situation in the present seems to deny God’s care for him, even though God seems distant, David still holds on to what he knows about God. God has been good to him, and so David keeps trusting. This is not trite or flippant trust in God. Nor is it loud and exuberant praise. This is trust and joy even in the mud and mire, even when David cannot see which way is up.

**Sorrowful yet always rejoicing.** David can say “How long will you forget me?” whilst simultaneously saying “But I trust your unfailing love.” If we were to ask David how these two things reconciled, he would probably have no idea. Yet they were both true. The anguish and uncertainty of verses 1-4 is not cancelled out by the trust in verses 5-6. But neither is the trust of verses 5-6 cancelled out by the anguish and uncertainty of verses 1-4. David is “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10).

Logically we may find that perplexing. But this is how we experience emotions. This is what the life of faith looks like. We can, like Paul, be sorrowful and joyful at the same time. At times we think we have to choose between the two. There is great freedom in knowing that we do not.

Unless we understand that sorrow and joy can coexist, how will we hear New Testament commands to “rejoice always”? We may think this means “always be happy and upbeat” or “never be sad.” Understood like this, these commands would sound inhumane. But joy is far deeper than just external happiness. True biblical joy—as in Psalm 13—can be hard-won in the trenches of suffering, even intermingled with tears.

Knowing that sorrow and joy can coexist means that sorrow is *not* a sign of an absence of joy in the LORD! We must not think that brokenness is a sign of spiritual failure. Sadness is not a denial of the gospel. To say with tears “LORD will you forget me forever” is not a sign of unbelief because the psalmist also says, “but LORD I will trust in your unfailing love.” We must understand this if we are to walk well with those who are grieving, or struggle with depression. We must understand this if we are not to be like Job’s comforters and condemn someone for their struggles.

Jesus did not say to people “Come to me all who are happy, come to me you who have everything worked out, come to me all who have no struggles.” He said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

Jesus himself never stopped trusting his Father, he was a man full of joy and confidence in God. Yet he wept at the grave of Lazarus, he still expressed deep anguish

in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus wept. David wept. Faithful Christians through history have wept. Sorrow and joy coexist. To cry “How Long O LORD will you forget me” is not to deny real trust in God: “But I trust in your steadfast love; but I rejoice in your salvation”

**He has been good.** How much more than the psalmist can we say, “The LORD has been good to me.” David would have looked back to God’s provision in his own life, and to the great events of deliverance like the exodus. But we have seen God’s goodness even more clearly displayed in Christ’s sacrifice for us at the cross. If ever we doubt God’s care, if ever we doubt his intentions for us, we can look at the moment in history when his character was most clearly revealed. There may be times where his face still seems hidden, his ways seem strange, where he seems to have forgotten us. But we can join with confidence in the words of Paul, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Looking at the cross we can say with absolute certainty, “He has been good to me” (Ps 13:6 NIV).

**Joy comes in the morning.** Bound up in the cry “How long?” is a looking to the future. As Christians, we now know what the psalmists could only dimly look forward to. Death has been defeated. Satan has been conquered. Christ has been raised. We await the full experiencing of the restoration Christ won through his death but have absolute certainty that pain and sorrow will not have the final word. Joy *will* come in the morning.

We need to remember this sense of “now and not yet” as we pray the lament psalms. We can cry out to God to end our distress, to heal our diseases, even bring life from the dead. We know he will do this fully and finally when Christ returns. He may answer these prayers in very obvious ways in this life. But he may not. All God’s promises are “yes” in Christ (2 Cor 1:20). But only when Christ returns will we fully experience the blessings of his kingdom and will pain, and sorrow be put away for good.

So, as we lament, we can ask for resolution in this life, and know that often that will be given. But we know that the greater and ultimate answer to these prayers will be in the new creation kingdom of God. In the book of Revelation, the martyrs cry “How long LORD” to Christ himself, longing for his return to judge (Rev 6:10).

The laments help orient us to our glorious and certain future. Paul describes Christians as those who “have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8 NIV). The laments can help us do that. “How long O LORD?” is a cry of faith, the Old Testament precursor to “Let your kingdom come!” (Matt 6:10)

## CHAPTER 12

### HOW TO BE THANKFUL

It is good to give thanks to the LORD (Ps 92:1). In fact, it is not just good; it is necessary for our spiritual health. According to Paul in Romans, thanklessness is the archetypal sin: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom 1:21).

Paul repeatedly tells the Colossian Christians to be thankful, because this will be the “prophylactic” against the false teaching that they are facing.<sup>1</sup> Thanksgiving is also an antidote to sinful thoughts and attitudes, as Paul reminds the Ephesians: “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph 5:4).

Thanksgiving is an antidote to idolatry—the way that the things of this earth can be enjoyed without them becoming rivals to God himself: “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:4).

Thanksgiving is our duty and our joy. It is no surprise, then, that thanksgiving is a dominant theme in the Psalms, showing that thanksgiving should be a dominant note in our prayer and worship.

There is much overlap between praise psalms and thanksgiving psalms. Both are expressions of praise to God. Both give *reasons* for this praise, celebrating his character and deeds. But whereas the praise psalms tend to focus on God and his deeds *in general*, thanksgiving psalms tend to praise God because of his deliverance in a

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Lucas, *The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: IVP, 1980), 156.



*particular* situation, often one of distress. Praise psalms characteristically use the word “he” describing repeatedly who God is and why he is to be praised. Thanksgiving psalms are personal, using the word “I” telling of how God came to the psalmist’s aid in a certain situation. Some thanksgiving psalms are corporate, spoken by the people as a whole— “we” (e.g., Ps 66). But in general, they are the words of one individual, albeit words that the whole community can join in with.

The LORD has given us praise psalms and thanksgiving psalms because we need both. We need the objective truths about God that the praise psalms celebrate. But there is also a need to be able to reflect on the fact that “he saved *me*.”

There are also similarities between thanksgiving psalms and laments. Whereas laments cry out to God in *present* distress, thanksgiving psalms look back to a time of distress that they have been delivered from. In many ways, the thanksgiving songs are the appropriate response to the LORD having answered the prayer of a lament.

### **Typical Features of Thanksgiving Psalms**

#### **Narrative of Distress**

I love the LORD, because he has heard  
my voice and my pleas for mercy.  
Because he inclined his ear to me,  
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.  
The snares of death encompassed me;  
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish. (Ps 116:1-3)

The psalmist begins by speaking of the situation of distress he was in. As so often in the Psalms, the description is a general one, with few specific details. Perhaps it was an illness. Perhaps a period of opposition. There is a hint later on in the psalm with the phrase “all men are liars” that the psalmist has been betrayed, or unjustly accused. But the description is ambiguous, and deliberately so. Rather than specifying exactly *what* happened, the psalmist describes how it *felt*. An inescapable situation. Death

personified as a monster who has us in its grip. Even if the psalmist was not facing physical death, he is clear that this was a death-like situation. Portraying the situation in such vivid terms helps those reading and singing the psalm to feel something of the agony.

Chesterton's wisdom on writing scary stories has become well known through Neil Gaiman's succinct paraphrase, "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten."<sup>2</sup> Children's authors portray terrifying enemies and monsters, so that when these monsters are finally defeated, the sense of relief is all the greater. The thanksgiving psalms work in the same way; the dangers and threats the psalmists face are portrayed in stark, terrifying terms, so that the psalm describes an emotional journey, helping the psalmist—and others who join in—feel the psalmists' agony, and share his relief at the LORD's deliverance.

### **Account of Deliverance**

Then I called on the name of the LORD:  
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"  
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;  
our God is merciful.  
The LORD preserves the simple;  
when I was brought low, he saved me.  
Return, O my soul, to your rest;  
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.  
For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling;  
I will walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living. (Ps 116:4-9)

As in the lament psalms, the cry for help is brief. Far more time is spent recounting the distress the psalmist was in. The cry for help here is as basic and simple as can be: "deliver my soul!" (v. 4) This is a prayer that could be learned and used by all

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), vii.

God's people for their various experiences of distress. Even in the most overwhelming situation, the prayer "O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul" is one that is profound and sufficient.

Having described in vivid terms the distress, the account of deliverance comes as sweet balm: "he saved me" (v. 6). The psalmist then goes on to record the LORD's deliverance in greater detail: "For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling" (v. 8).

The point here is not information, but emotion. The psalmist is wanting to express what it felt like to be delivered. He doesn't describe what happened as you would have seen it—perhaps a military victory, a dramatic rescue, or recovery from illness. Rather he describes what the *LORD* did—the theology of the deliverance.

The purpose of telling of this deliverance is not simply to give thanks to the LORD, nor even to encourage the congregation who join in with this song. The psalmist preaches this deliverance to his soul. The rest of the psalm shows that he still faces serious difficulties (vv. 11, 15). But he preaches the LORD's deliverance to his soul. He tells his soul, "Return to your rest"—or "Be at rest," because the LORD has been good to him (v. 7).

The LORD's actions in the past are reasons for the psalmist to have confidence in the present and hope for the future. This is why the narrative of deliverance is so detailed and vivid. These vivid, concrete images have a power to take root in the soul. Zack Eswine could have easily been speaking about the Psalms when he wrote about how theology must never be divorced from the messiness of life:

Imagine learning our doctrine of God by studying our best theologians while sitting in the ER amid anxious parents, traumatized children, gunshot wounds and asthma attacks. Imagine reading amid the stale smell of coffee, amid the sound of tears and the sights of perplexity, trauma and frustration. How would this impact how we process the doctrines and categories of God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience? Or what if we read our doctrine of salvation where mental patients

spook the halls?<sup>3</sup>

This is what happens in the Psalms. The Psalms do not give an ivory towered theology, a doctrine of God that is removed from the realities of life. The Psalms present precious truths of God's grace that have been forged in the furnace of suffering.

When we struggle, it is rarely an academic question about God's omnipotence. Often our doubts are not primarily intellectual; they are at the more powerful level of our feelings. We feel overwhelmed, surrounded, ensnared. And we think there's no escape. Terrors do not present themselves to us in bland language. They present themselves to us with fangs and claws, or as oppressive weights and overwhelming waves. The Psalms record the LORD's deliverance in even more powerful language—language that strengthens weak knees and girds up trembling hearts. Who is the LORD who is on our side? The one who breaks the teeth of the wicked, who lifts our burdens, who delivers from death, who draws his people out of many waters.

**Learning of the LORD's character.** Through his experience of deliverance, the psalmist learns of the LORD's character. In many ways, there is nothing new in this psalm. The psalmist no doubt knew Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." This note is trumpeted a thousand times throughout Scripture. Yet when the psalmist affirms similar truths in verse 5, he is speaking about what he now knows from experience: "Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful" (Ps 116:5).

These words that would have been familiar as a confession of faith have now been written on the psalmist's heart in a new and deeper way. It should be sufficient for God to say "I am the LORD, gracious and righteous and full of compassion. Now just live that out." The sure and certain word of Scripture is enough.

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<sup>3</sup> Zack Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Life and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 180.

But the LORD knows our weakness, he remembers we are dust. So, he does not just tell us what he is like, he graciously demonstrates it again and again in history and in our own lives. He is not content with simply stating it. He says “I’m going to rub your face in this truth, I am dependable. I am going to use these hard times to push these truths deep into your soul. I want you to be able to say, perhaps from your heart in a way you haven’t before, ‘The LORD is gracious and righteous, full of compassion.’”

### **The Psalmist’s Praise and Call to Praise**

What shall I render to the LORD  
for all his benefits to me?  
I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the LORD,  
I will pay my vows to the LORD  
in the presence of all his people. . . .

I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving  
and call on the name of the LORD.  
I will pay my vows to the LORD  
in the presence of all his people,  
in the courts of the house of the LORD,  
in your midst, O Jerusalem.  
Praise the LORD! (Ps 116:12-14, 17-19)

After narrating his distress and the LORD’s deliverance, the psalmist turns to praise and thanksgiving. The only right response to the LORD having answered prayer is to thank him for it. By thanking the LORD, the psalmist is declaring that this deliverance was the LORD’s doing, and no one else’s.

The thanksgiving the psalmist offers is not merely a personal thing between him and God. He promises to praise the LORD publicly—and the psalm itself is one way of him doing that. This way the whole congregation can have their hearts lifted in thankfulness to God.

After the entire psalm being in the first person singular “I” describing the experience of the psalmist, in the last line the address changes. The final “Praise the

LORD!” is a plural command. It is a command to the people as a whole to join in the thanks and praise.

There is something very powerful about testimony. When a member of the congregation shares of what the LORD has been doing in his or her life, this can be a great blessing to others in the church. Storytellers through the ages have been well aware of how vast truths are often best told through the circumstances of one individual’s life. So too with the Psalms, and with testimony. Often, we learn best of the LORD’s character by seeing his work in the small details of one individual’s life. This is put well by novelist, poet, and minister Frederick Buechner: “The story of any one of us is in some measure the story of us all.”<sup>4</sup>

Testimony in church and amongst Christian believers should not be limited to stories of conversion. Those testimonies are wonderful, but we do not want to say the LORD’s miraculous activity in our lives are limited to when we come to faith. I heard a testimony from a girl who was still in the depths of mental illness, speaking of the LORD’s work in her life. The story was not “I prayed to the LORD and now my mental illness is gone,” but she spoke of how the LORD was walking with her and sustaining her, even in the midst of great trials. She spoke of good days, and harder days. But she spoke of looking to God and discovering his mercy in even unlikely places. It helped all listening to know a little more deeply what it meant for God to be near to the broken-hearted. It reminded everyone that God could indeed be trusted.

As well as being important for the believing community, thanksgiving is profoundly missional. God answers our prayer, meets our need, so that we can be missional. He chose a people for the sake of the world (Exod 19:4-6) and there is something about giving thanks that makes us want the whole world to know. Thanksgiving is taking the focus off us to what God has done, in our community and

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 6.

beyond.

### **How Should Thanksgiving Psalms Be Used?**

At first, we hear the words of Psalm 116 as the personal prayer of the psalmist, in response to the LORD's deliverance. Then these became words for others to join in with, in celebrating the deliverance of the psalmist. But there is a further use of the psalm: it presents itself as being suitable for God's people to use in other situations. Because the deliverance the psalmist received is an expression of the LORD's character, there is an implicit call in this psalm for others to expect God to deliver in a similar way.

Psalm 116 is written in a deliberately general enough way for it be able to be used to give thanks in different situations: the deliverance from an illness, from an enemy, in fact from any situation that is like the "snares of death" encompassing someone.

### **Little and Big Deliverances**

Yet not only could this psalm be reapplied so others could thank God for their personal deliverances, it could also be used to speak of the great deliverance of God's people from Egypt.

Psalm 116 is part of a group of psalms called the Egyptian *Hallel*, celebrating the exodus, and so would be sung at Passover. This psalm of a personal or "little" deliverance was used to celebrate the great deliverance of the Old Testament: God rescuing his people from Egypt. This is entirely appropriate, as both deliverances are an expression of God's character. The psalmist sang of a LORD who saves from deep distress, and these words were seen as entirely fitting to celebrate what the people had gone through as a nation. Within the Psalter we see a psalm of personal deliverance being reapplied to a situation of national deliverance and redemption.

When a Christian sings Psalm 116, it is perhaps entirely natural and instinctive

to see in it a picture of the rescue won by Christ at the cross:

For you have delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling;  
I will walk before the LORD  
in the land of the living. (Ps 116:8-9)

This is entirely appropriate for how the psalm was used in the Old Testament—as the great deliverance out of slavery in Egypt becomes a pattern of Christ’s deliverance of his people at the cross. The vivid language of the distress the psalmist was in—“the anguish of the grave”—gives an opportunity to reflect in a vivid and powerful way on what Christ has saved us from. These are perhaps new lenses through which to marvel at the work of Christ on our behalf and grow in our thankfulness to him.

So, Christians can use this psalm in many ways: to celebrate a “little deliverance” they have received, whether from illness, persecution or danger. They can use it corporately to give thanks for God’s work in someone else’s life. And they can also use it to thank God for his great rescue achieved at the cross.

In fact, the Psalms never ask us to choose between celebrating “little deliverances” and the “big deliverance” of our salvation. Here a “little deliverance” becomes an opportunity to also thank God for his grand salvation plan in Christ. This also works the other way around, as we shall see in the chapter on remembering. God’s “big” deliverances in history are reasons for confidence that he will also deliver in all other trials.

The Psalms teach us that any time we receive an answered prayer, no matter how small, this should teach us of the character of God, and point us to our God who is gracious and compassionate and will save his people from their greatest need.

### **The Formative Nature of Thanksgiving**

We saw that the psalmist took truths he knew about God and preached them to



his soul. There is a formative nature to the psalmist's thanksgiving. As he celebrates what the LORD has done in the past, this will shape him to trust the LORD more in the future. As the congregation joined with him in thanks, they too would have been reminded in a powerful way of the character and goodness of their LORD.

So too with us as we cry out to God. As he proves himself faithful to his promises, truths that we have known as head knowledge, now become truths we each say, "I've tasted and seen, the LORD has been good to me." We may even say that part of why the LORD allows us to go through distress is so that we might be delivered, give him thanks and be built up. The psalmist trusts God more for the future because he reflects with thankfulness on what the LORD has already done for him—something I consider more in the next chapter on remembering.

If we make a practice of looking back and seeing the LORD's work in our lives, we learn of his character in a different way than if we simply read of it. Our faith is more than simply believing the right things. We are also to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Ps 34:8). The psalmist is saying he has done that. He is saying that he put his faith into practice, he called out to God and found the LORD to be faithful and merciful. Thanksgiving has helped the psalmist know his LORD better, at a deeper level.

### **Conclusion**

The thanksgiving psalms teach us to come to every situation with thankfulness, and they give us words and patterns to use. Perhaps we do not often feel thankful, but by rehearsing what deep distress we were in and how the LORD saved us, our hearts can be lifted to God so that like the psalmist we might be able to say with renewed vigor "I love the LORD!" (Ps 116:1). A great danger in the Christian life is independence from God, thinking we can do it on our own. The thanksgiving psalms remind us that whatever blessings we have are from the LORD.

Are you hungry for more of God? Take time to reflect on the prayers he has

answered. Think of his personal purposeful care for you in your life. Join with other believers in celebrating what God has done for them. It is good and right to give God the honor he is due. But it is also a means of opening our eyes to God's love and faithfulness and being strengthened to love and trust him more.

## CHAPTER 13

### HOW TO DELIGHT IN THE KING

Earlier we saw that Psalm 1 introduced the Psalter, encouraging people to meditate on God’s law, and take the Psalms on their lips. But Psalm 2 forms a second introduction to the Psalter. Whereas Psalm 1 pronounces blessing on the one who meditates on God’s law, Psalm 2 pronounces blessing on the one who takes refuge in God’s king. The king is a dominant theme in the Psalter, and one of the purposes for the book of Psalms is so that we may know this king and know the blessing of finding refuge in him. Psalms that have a particular focus on the king are known as “royal psalms.”

Unlike praises, laments, or thanksgivings, royal psalms are not united by any common structure. They do not all look the same—in fact, they are very different. What unites them is their content: a focus on the Davidic king. These are not just psalms where David is referenced, but where kingship is prominent. Over the years there has been debate over exactly which psalms are royal, but the original ten psalms identified by Gunkel have been universally accepted as royal: 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132, and 144.<sup>1</sup>

As Christians, these psalms are particularly precious to us because in the king of the Old Testament, we see foreshadowed the greater king Jesus Christ. Old Testament kings were anointed with oil to mark them out as God’s king—and this word *anointed* is the word *Messiah* in Hebrew or *Christ* in Greek. The king of the Old Testament is the pattern for the greater king to come, David’s greater son, Jesus Christ, *the* Messiah. At

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<sup>1</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 178.

their best, David and Solomon picture something of God's king ruling over God's kingdom.

For those of us who have become over-familiar with some of the descriptions of Christ in the gospels, these Old Testament portraits of the king give fresh lenses through which to gaze on our king in his beauty. Christ is the true king of Psalm 2, the one to whom all nations will one day bow, the one who has been given all authority, the one who is God's Son. The royal psalms are a rich gift to Christians to help them learn of their king, and to know the blessing of taking refuge in him.

### **Psalm 2**

Psalm 2 introduces the king, but in a surprising way. The psalm begins by speaking of the nations raging:

Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
“Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.” (Ps 2:1-3)

This is the world after Genesis 3—people trying to burst off the shackles. People think life is better without God. This is the age-old lie of Satan, the same as in the Garden of Eden. Psalm 2 speaks of the world since the fall—humanity in rebellion against its creator. Humanity is unable to dethrone God himself, so instead, God's king is attacked and persecuted. D. G. McCartney claims, “By dethroning man on earth, Satan thought to dethrone God's reign on earth.”<sup>2</sup>

He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the LORD holds them in derision.  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,

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<sup>2</sup> D. G. McCartney, “Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Vicegerency,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 1 (1994): 15.

and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
“As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.” (Ps 2:4-6)

The LORD is in no way threatened or challenged by this rebellion. He sits in heaven and laughs. His response is perhaps surprising—he installs his King in Zion. Zion is a hill that is part of Jerusalem; often in the Psalms it is used interchangeably with “Jerusalem” Israel’s capital. Jerusalem was not a great capital of the world. It was not a significant place. It was on an important trade route, but a small kingdom and a small king in many ways compared to the super powers around. The LORD’s response to a worldwide rebellion is surprisingly local: to install a king in Zion. This is the king to whom all nations will bow—this king who looks very ordinary in many ways.

I will tell of the decree:  
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (Ps 2:7-9)

Verses 7-9 record the words of the king, recounting promises made to him, perhaps at his anointing. This king is called God’s “Son.” Israel had been known as God’s son (as had Adam) but “Son” comes to be a kingly title—for a ruler who will be like God and will rule for him. David had been promised that he would have a son who would reign forever, of whom God said, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam 7:14). This king—God’s “Son”—is given dominion over all nations, and authority to punish all who rebel against the LORD and his anointed. This is an incredibly exalted picture of the king, greater than anything that has been seen in the kingship of Israel up to this point. Psalm 2 speaks of a king like David, but so much more than David—words that can only be true of Christ who would receive all authority from his Father to rule and judge the nations. The whole Psalter could be read as the story of (or search for) the king of Psalm 2, a sort of kingship that David and Solomon could only

begin to typify.

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
    be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
    and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
    lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
    for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps 2:10-12)

In light of the authority given to this king, the response is not surprising. Submit to this king. Kiss the son. Take refuge in him.<sup>3</sup> Right from the beginning of the book of Psalms, we are presented with a Davidic king with staggering authority. But also, a king who is opposed and whose rule is challenged.

Ultimately this psalm is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ is the one to whom all authority is given. Christ is the one who rules for God, such that “whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:23). Christ is the one who was opposed by sinful men who sought to overthrow God’s authority; the apostles saw Psalm 2:1-3 as fulfilled in humanity gathering together to crucify Christ (Acts 4:25-28). Christ is the one who will return to judge and break his enemies in pieces. Christ is the one to whom everyone must come for refuge.

This is a sobering picture of the king with which to begin the Psalter. It is a portrait of Christ that may seem unfamiliar to us, especially if, as Calvin puts it, we are used more to descriptions of his compassion and gentleness.

But this severe and dreadful sovereignty is set before us for no other purpose than to strike alarm into his enemies; and it is not at all inconsistent with the kindness with which Christ tenderly and sweetly cherishes his own people. He who shows himself

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<sup>3</sup> There is an ambiguity in the very last line of the psalm: who is the ‘him’? It could refer to God, or it could refer to the king. The ESV translation pushes one to think it is the king, which is perhaps most likely. But is this a deliberate ambiguity, hinting at the fact that this ‘Son’ of God who is a king in David’s line, will actually be none other than God himself?

a loving shepherd to his gentle sheep, must treat the wild beasts with a degree of severity either to convert them from their cruelty, or effectually to restrain it.<sup>4</sup>

There will be more said about the king in the Psalter. We will see the mercies of this king, and we will see the sufferings of this king. This is why Psalm 2 is needed as the introduction: to introduce the extraordinary *authority* of this king in David's line.

### **Psalms *about* the King**

The royal psalms that are easiest to engage with are those where the psalmist speaks *about* the king. Though the language is that of Old Testament Davidic kings, we can hear this teaching about the king as teaching about Jesus Christ, almost in the same way as we hear Paul speaking of Christ, for example in Philippians 2. Two of the most glorious portraits of the king in the Psalms—indeed two of the richest pictures of Christ given in all of Scripture—are found in Psalms 45 and 72.

#### **Psalm 45**

To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah; a love song.

My heart overflows with a pleasing theme;  
I address my verses to the king;  
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. (Ps 45:1)

The heading of the psalm tells us this is a love song, or a wedding song. These are words spoken about the Davidic king—perhaps Solomon—on his wedding day. Through this portrait of this glorious majestic king, and his treasured, most beautiful bride we are given a picture of Christ and his church.

**The conquest of the king.** Psalm 45 continues,

You are the most handsome of the sons of men;  
grace is poured upon your lips;

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 2:20.

therefore God has blessed you forever.  
Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,  
in your splendor and majesty!  
In your majesty ride out victoriously  
for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness;  
let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!  
Your arrows are sharp  
in the heart of the king's enemies;  
the peoples fall under you. (Ps 45:2-5)

He rides out in majesty. He is powerful. He is mighty. This king will conquer, just as the king of Psalm 2 was promised. His arrows are sharp, yet he rides out “for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness” (v. 4). This king is mighty but always uses his power for good, not for evil. He fights for truth, for justice, not for selfish gain or oppression.

**The reign of the king.** Psalm 45 continues,

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.  
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;  
you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.  
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;  
your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.  
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;  
daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;  
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. (Ps 45:6-9)

The words beginning this section are too elevated for any king in David's line, adding to the developing sense in the Old Testament that the great Messiah to come would not simply be a great human king, but would be God himself.<sup>5</sup>

Verses 6-7 portray the glories of this kingdom,

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;  
you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. (Ps 45:6b-7)

At their best, the reigns of David and Solomon approached this glorious ideal

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Ezek 34:15 with Ezek 34:23.



but both men quickly fell and turned to wickedness and exploitation. But this verse is fully fulfilled in Christ, who always exercises his reign for good and righteous ends, never for selfish gain. Because of the way he exercises his reign, God anoints this king with the oil of gladness (v. 7)—pointing us to Christ as the one who is exalted as the name above every name because his self-humbling for the sake of his people (Phlm 2).

Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.  
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad; (Ps 45:8)

This is Old Testament language, the language of the courts of David and Solomon, of course. But this language points to the richness and splendor of the king. He is not a thin or miserly king; this is a king who enjoys life and goodness, enjoys creation and culture and music and art and the good things of this life. Never in a grasping, selfish way, but in a way that brings and shares that blessing with his people. This king, as Adam was supposed to do, rules over a good creation and delights in that creation. And, as Adam was supposed to do, this king brings that creation to greater glory through arts and music and science and politics and literature and song.

The king's greatness is further seen in how he treats people:

daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;  
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. (Ps 45:9)

“Daughters of kings” surely refers to the daughters of the other kings that *this* king has conquered. We all know so tragically what kings do to conquered peoples. What powerful men do to women over whom they have control. Yet this king has conquered to bless, not to oppress. With his scepter of truth and justice, he has liberated them and given them honor. These ladies, far from being brought into the king's harem, are brought to a place of honor. Far from being mistreated, under this king's rule they find liberty. This king treats the weak with dignity and respect and honors them. This is a king in whose presence the vulnerable can feel safe.

**The bride.** The king's bride is from among these conquered peoples: "at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir." (v. 9) If the king here ultimately points to Christ, the bride points to the church: the bride of Christ. The church who has been conquered with God's kindness, who has been brought out of the kingdom of darkness, into the kingdom of Christ and is there no longer as slave, no longer as servant, but royalty, honored by this king. It is in this context that we must hear the charge given to this bride:

Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear:  
forget your people and your father's house,  
and the king will desire your beauty.  
Since he is your lord, bow to him. (Ps 45:10-11)

The bride is called to gladly and joyfully and submit to this king. To turn away from other allegiances and affections. Bow to this king, not in cowering submission, but in an honored position of joy.

Verse 11 could be translated "the king is *enthralled* with your beauty." Perhaps we do not often feel beautiful. Perhaps we often feel weak, unworthy, dirty, shameful. Perhaps we feel that because of things we have done. Perhaps we feel that because of things done to us by others. And yet this king looks at us, if we are his people, and sees us not as any of these things but as a royal bride. He is enthralled by our beauty. What a glorious truth to be thought of this way by this king. This beauty is not one we have achieved by our own merit; it is his love that beautifies us. It is the security that we have in him that allows us to flourish in this way. Of course, part of this beauty is from the royal robes he gives us (v. 13)—royal robes of righteousness. But this is also a real, inward beauty as we seek to love him and serve him. We think of the lady who poured oil on Jesus's feet. A sinful woman, looked down on, despised, not given a place in the society of the day. Yet Jesus rebuked those who criticized her. Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing to me" (Mark 14:6). So too, we can do beautiful things for our LORD as

we seek to serve him—what an astonishing thing for the king to be enthralled with our beauty!

With joy and gladness they are led along  
as they enter the palace of the king. (Ps 45:15)

Isn't that the future we look forward to? We experience joy and gladness *now* as Christ's treasured bride, but we look forward to the full experience of joy as we enter glorious palace of the new creation. An entrance that is not hesitant, that is not uncertain, but an entrance that is with joy and gladness. We will be led into glory by our king. No wonder the psalmist can conclude of this king:

I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations;  
therefore nations will praise you forever and ever. (Ps 45:17)

## **Psalm 72**

Psalm 72 has a similar tone of joy. Psalm 72 is headed "of Solomon" which in this case probably means "for Solomon." It finishes with "the prayers of David are ended," suggesting David as the author. This psalm is David praying for his son Solomon asking for what type of king he hopes he might be. And again, what David prayed for Solomon (and was partially fulfilled) we know to be fulfilled supremely in Jesus Christ. Just like in Psalm 45, these robes are too glorious and great to be worn by any human king.

**The reign of the king.** Psalm 72 begins,

Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to the royal son!  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice!  
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness! (Ps 72:1-3)

This is what the kings were supposed to do. When a good king ruled, righteousness abounded throughout the land. The weak were not oppressed. The poor

were not exploited. Justice reigned. A good king was glorious news for the people. A good king meant that people would flourish, and rather than fighting wars they would be enjoying prosperity and the blessings of the land.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the children of the needy,  
and crush the oppressor! (Ps 72:4)

Like in Psalm 45 we see the king wielding his sword. This is not a king who looks on injustice and does nothing. This is a king that crushes the oppressor. There are echoes here of the promise in Genesis 3:15, of a “serpent crusher” who would crush the serpent so the people would be afflicted no more. This king would crush the oppressor and that is how he defends the cause of the poor and gives deliverance to the cause of the needy. This king defeats his enemies. It is salvation through judgement.

David prays that the king may reign forever:

May they fear you while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!

In his days may the righteous flourish,  
and peace abound, till the moon be no more! (Ps 72:5,7)

Solomon had a glorious kingdom but only for a time. David prays—in line with the promises made to him in 2 Samuel 7—that his son will reign forever. And that is what is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

**Worldwide dominion.** Psalm 72 continues,

May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth!  
May desert tribes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust!  
May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands  
render him tribute;  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts!  
May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations serve him! (Ps 72:8-11)

This is the fulfillment of Psalm 2 but even more so. This king is portrayed with even more glory, even more majesty. All nations bowing before him. As the psalmist speaks of the king's might and his conquering power, we are told *why* he is given this power—note the word “for” which introduces the reasons for this dominion:

For he delivers the needy when he calls,  
the poor and him who has no helper.  
He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.  
From oppression and violence he redeems their life,  
and precious is their blood in his sight. (Ps 72:12-14)

This is the sort of king to whom God gives worldwide dominion (cf. Phlm 2:9). This was a call to the kings of Israel to aspire to this ideal. But again, these words point beyond any human king to Christ, who alone is worthy of worldwide authority and obedience. Not simply because he is mighty and can force people into submission but because he is worthy and because people—when they understand who he is—gladly bow before him and discover the glorious liberty of the kingdom of God.

And so, the psalm continues speaking of the majesty and glory of this king.

May people be blessed in him,  
all nations call him blessed! (Ps 72:17b)

These words echo back to the promise to Abraham that through Abraham and his offspring—who themselves would be blessed—all nations, all the families of the earth, would be blessed (Gen 12:1-3). That is the Abrahamic covenant. The promise to Abraham of blessing to the world through the blessing of Abraham and his offspring. Through the rest of the Old Testament, these promises are narrowed down and find their fulfillment in the king in David's line. The promises to Abraham will be continued, will only be fulfilled, through the king. He is the one on whom all the hopes of the people rest. He will be the blessed one. And he will be the one through whom blessing comes to the world, pointing to Jesus Christ—the true offspring of Abraham, the true king in the

line of David.

Psalms 45 and 72 paint in glorious colors the king of Israel, the king of David's line but these psalms were always too grand for David and Solomon. David and Solomon at best just began to picture this but these things find their true fulfillment in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we can use these psalms to help us delight in the character and reign of our king, Jesus.

### **Psalm 20**

Some of the other royal psalms have a slightly less grand view of the king and focus less on the “ideal king” but more on the mixed realities of the king's reign. Psalm 20 is a prayer of the people that the LORD would answer the king. In fact, it was spoken to the king:

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!  
May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! (Ps 20:1)

This is a prayer for the king. But in this psalm, we see that the fate of the people was bound up with the fate of the king. The psalm begins speaking only about the king but ends:

O LORD, save the king!  
May he answer *us* when we call [emphasis added]. (Ps 20:9)

May the LORD answer *you*, the king, but may he also answer *us*. As the LORD answers prayers for the king he also answers prayers for the people. The fate of the people is bound up with that of the king. We see that in the middle of the psalm. After four verses of prayer for the LORD to deliver and rescue the king—perhaps relief from his enemies, perhaps victory in a battle (we do not know the exact situation)—but after prayers for the king's deliverance and support from the LORD, verse 5 shows what this means for the people:

May *we* shout for joy over your salvation [emphasis added],  
and in the name of our God set up our banners! (Ps 20:5)

These prayers for the king are also prayers for the people. If the king is delivered the people will shout for joy over the LORD's salvation. The deliverance for the king will incorporate deliverance for the people because the fate of the people was bound up with the king. We see that consistently through the Old Testament. The king was to deliver his people from their enemies, to lead them in righteousness. The fortunes of the people were bound up with the king under the Davidic covenant. And the people understood this as they prayed this prayer for deliverance for the king.

**Praying Psalm 20 as Christians.** As Christians we can see this prayer as having *already* been answered. Jesus Christ is our king—the king who has been delivered by the LORD, who has been raised from death, who has been raised to honor and whose salvation his people share. We can look back on this psalm as an example of prayer that has already been answered. We can celebrate that what the people in Israel longed for, we know to be fulfilled in Christ our king.

But we might also use such a psalm longing for its full fulfilment when Christ is revealed in glory. We might long for the day when we can shout for joy over Christ's salvation and in the name of God set up our banners. We might long for the day when Christ's kingdom is fully experienced and vindicated as every knee bows before him, as every tongue confesses him as LORD. This psalm we see is answered in Christ, but we also might look forward to the full experience of that when Christ is seen in all his glory and we his people experience the benefits of the salvation he won. We might use this prayer to pray "your kingdom come."

### **Psalm 21**

Psalm 21 immediately follows Psalm 20 with very similar themes. Really it is the answer to the prayer of Psalm 20. In Psalm 20 the people pray for the king's deliverance, in Psalm 21 they thank God for how he has done this:

O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices,  
and in your salvation how greatly he exults!  
You have given him his heart's desire  
and have not withheld the request of his lips. (Ps 21:1-2)

The second verse is a direct answer to the prayer in Psalm 20:4:

May he [i.e. God] grant you your heart's desire  
and fulfill all your plans! (Ps 20:4)

This king has been blessed by the LORD:

For you meet him with rich blessings;  
you set a crown of fine gold upon his head.  
He asked life of you; you gave it to him,  
length of days forever and ever.  
His glory is great through your salvation;  
splendor and majesty you bestow on him.  
For you make him most blessed forever;  
you make him glad with the joy of your presence. (Ps 21:3-6)

Verse 6 could be translated “you make him a source of blessing”—again a pointer to the Abrahamic promise of blessing being fulfilled through this king.

As the people sing of the deliverance of this king, as they sing of the victories of their king, they are fully aware of what they have prayed in Psalm 20—that their fate is fully bound up in this king. The LORD’s deliverance of his king is good news for the people—a reason for great joy!

**Praying Psalm 21 as Christians.** As Christians, we see Psalm 21 as fulfilled our king Jesus Christ. God has given him—Jesus—his heart’s desire (v. 2), he has not withheld the request of his lips. But what was that request?

In John’s gospel we see Jesus’ repeated request to his Father that he be glorified. But this will happen through Jesus having a people for his very own, enjoying the blessings of eternal life (John 12:28-33, 17:1-3, 24). In this Old Testament psalm of the LORD honoring the king, and the blessing this brings to the people, we have a foreshadowing of the Trinitarian love and delight between Father and Son, which is the



very source and heart of the blessing for God's people! Thinking like this, we see rich meaning in this psalm:

His glory is great through your salvation;  
splendor and majesty you bestow on him. (Ps 21:5)

How much more than the Old Testament people can we see the glory of our king through his salvation, can we see the splendor and majesty bestowed on him because of his suffering to death. How much more do we see Jesus Christ as blessed (v. 6) and a source of blessing.

For the king trusts in the LORD,  
and through the steadfast love of the Most High he shall not be moved. (v. 7)

How much more do we see that our king Jesus trusted in the LORD, trusted him even in the Garden of Gethsemane, trusted him even to death. But how much more do we see Jesus as a king whose hand will find out his enemies:

Your hand will find out all your enemies;  
your right hand will find out those who hate you.  
You will make them as a blazing oven  
when you appear.  
The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath,  
and fire will consume them.  
You will destroy their descendants from the earth,  
and their offspring from among the children of man.  
Though they plan evil against you,  
though they devise mischief, they will not succeed.  
For you will put them to flight;  
you will aim at their faces with your bows. (Ps 21:8-12)

Jesus can only be savior because he is victor. Jesus can only rescue his people from the dominion of darkness because he is the one who consumes all wickedness. In the kingdom of Israel, the people would have known that their salvation depended on their king's defeat of his enemies—and it is true for us in the kingdom of Christ. This king is the same king of Psalm 2—merciful, compassionate, and gracious—yet who if resisted will come in judgment to crush all evil.

The psalm concludes,

Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength!  
We will sing and praise your power. (Ps 21:13)

The LORD is exalted—is praised—by the people because of the position of power and authority that is given to his king. As Christians we are lifted to praise God because of his installation of his good and just king, who reigns to the glory of God.

### **Psalm 132**

Psalm 132 has similar themes to Psalms 20-21, but also an awareness of the difficulties David faced. Psalm 132 reflects on the gap between the promises made to David, and the reality that the Davidic kings did not know this worldwide rule, this blessing and prosperity for the people. Psalm 132 is a prayer of the people for the king when the promises to David seem *not* to be fulfilled—either in a time of no king, or of kings who have fallen so far short of the Davidic ideal:

Remember, O LORD, in David’s favor,  
all the hardships he endured . . . .

For the sake of your servant David,  
do not turn away the face of your anointed one. (Ps 132:1, 10)

The people long for a king like David, for some of the glory days of David and Solomon’s kingdom. So, they remind the LORD of the promise he made:

The LORD swore to David a sure oath  
from which he will not turn back:  
“One of the sons of your body  
I will set on your throne.  
If your sons keep my covenant  
and my testimonies that I shall teach them,  
their sons also forever  
shall sit on your throne.” (Ps 132:11-12)

The people appeal to God’s covenant with David, made in 2 Samuel 7, that David will always have a descendant on the throne. The people pray in faith when they

see no Davidic king; when they do not see blessing, they pray for the LORD to restore their blessing through the king of David's line who rules in Zion:

For the LORD has chosen Zion;  
he has desired it for his dwelling place . . . .

There I will make a horn to sprout for David;  
I have prepared a lamp for my anointed. (Ps 132:13, 17)

In times of trial—even when the kings in David's line seem long gone—the people look to God's promise of a king, and appeal on the basis of his covenant with David. As Christians we can see this prayer was answered ultimately in Christ.

As such, we pray this prayer in a somewhat different way than the people—it is more a prayer we reflect on and thank God that he has answered. Jesus is this king who restores peace, prosperity, and blessing. Through Jesus God's people have been abundantly blessed with provisions, have been satisfied with bread and shout for joy. Psalms like this can help us understand the tragedy that befell the people when they did not have a good king, help us to understand why the familiar statement “Jesus is the Messiah” is in fact such good news, an answer to the hopes and dreams of generations.

### **Conclusion: Psalms *about* the King**

Psalms like Psalm 45 and Psalm 72 are easy to engage with as Christians, as they so obviously point beyond any human king to give vivid pictures of our Messiah, Jesus. Psalms like Psalms 20 and 21, and Psalm 132, can also easily be used by Christians, seeing them all as prayers of the people that are fulfilled in Jesus. At times they might be prayers we see as already having been answered, so we pray them slightly differently to the people, but we still find ourselves in a very similar position to the speakers in the psalm; we are the people who benefit from the rule of this king in David's line.

## **Psalms where the King Is the Speaker**

Psalms where the king is spoken about are quite easy for us to engage with as Christians. But it is harder to know what to do with psalms where the speaker of the psalm is the king.

### **Psalm 18**

Psalm 18 has a long superscription which gives us the situation of the psalm:

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, the servant of the LORD, who addressed the words of this song to the LORD on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.

“Servant of the LORD” is in itself a kingly title—only used of Moses, David, and Joshua in the Old Testament. Psalm 18 is almost identical to 2 Samuel 22, where David reflects on his life and sings this psalm of deliverance. The final verse also strongly emphasizes that it is a king who is speaking:

Great salvation he brings to his king,  
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,  
to David and his offspring forever. (Ps 18:50)

This psalm records David, the anointed king, reflecting on his life and the deliverance he has received from the LORD. I considered this psalm a little in an earlier section looking at the poetry. But as David looks back at his life, a life that is characterized by military success, by wise planning, by David being a man of victory and might, David reflects and sees *God's* hand “the LORD did this. . . . The LORD did this.” He looks back over his life and makes sure it is clear—this is not the story of human powers, of chariots and horse, but of the LORD. David describes it in such a way as to help us feel the emotion of this, not simply to know the LORD delivered him but to feel the emotion of that deliverance. David uses language of previous Scripture—particularly exodus language. He uses language of the people being brought out of Egypt:

Then the channels of the sea were seen,  
and the foundations of the world were laid bare

at your rebuke, O LORD,  
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

He sent from on high, he took me;  
he drew me out of many waters. (Ps 18:15-16)

With these allusions to Moses and the exodus, David sees his deliverance as part of God's continued pattern of delivering his people.

As Christians we can read this and in David see a picture of this greater king, Jesus. But just as Moses leading the people out of Egypt benefitted the people, and David's victory benefits the people, so we do not see these words as entirely foreign to us. Though it is Christ who achieves the victory, nonetheless people and king are bound together tightly as they were in the Old Testament. What happens to the king becomes the fate of the people.

This is why a personal song of David (recorded in 2 Samuel 22) can become words for all the people to share in, as the psalm is brought into the songbook of Israel as Psalm 18. What happened to the king became words for all the people to share in, to join in, because their king's deliverance became their deliverance.

As Christians, we hear these words as first the words of the king—David, foreshadowing Jesus. But we too can sing them, as the people in Israel did. We too can say we have been “drawn out of many waters”—just like Moses, like David, and like Jesus. We too have been rescued from a strong enemy and from those who hated us (v. 17). We can see these words as speaking of our situation, as those who—like the people in David's day—have their fate tightly bound to the fate of their king.

#### **Psalm 144**

Psalm 144 has a very similar tone and language to Psalm 18. It is a psalm about the king's battles, and the LORD's role in these:

Blessed be the LORD, my rock,  
who trains my hands for war,  
and my fingers for battle;

he is my steadfast love and my fortress,  
my stronghold and my deliverer (Ps 144:1-2)

Unlike Psalm 18 where the king is looking back on victories the LORD has given, here the king is appealing to God for deliverance:

Bow your heavens, O LORD, and come down!  
Touch the mountains so that they smoke! . . .  
Stretch out your hand from on high;  
rescue me and deliver me from the many waters,  
from the hand of foreigners (Ps 144:5, 7)

Again, this is exodus-type language, Sinai-type language. “LORD, act as you acted to Moses. LORD, as you acted to David in the past.” Here it seems to be a future king in view, “LORD, deliver me as you delivered the kings of old.”

But then the end of the psalm speaks about the people. The reason the king is fighting, and the reason he wants the LORD to deliver him is so that there may be prosperity for the people:

May our sons in their youth  
be like plants full grown,  
our daughters like corner pillars  
cut for the structure of a palace;  
may our granaries be full,  
providing all kinds of produce;  
may our sheep bring forth thousands  
and ten thousands in our fields;  
may our cattle be heavy with young,  
suffering no mishap or failure in bearing; (Ps 144:12-14)

The psalm speaks of peace and stability—a “Psalm 1” type prosperity, achieved through the king. And so, the final blessing of this psalm of the king is pronounced not on the king, but on the *people*:

Blessed are the people to whom such blessings fall!  
Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD! (Ps 144:15)

The deliverance of the king is for the sake of the people. The king is the speaker of this psalm, but the whole congregation can join in, because the fate of the

people is bound up to that of the king; the king is the representative of the people. As Christians, these are words we can use to celebrate our delivering king, Jesus, but we can also use them to describe our own experience as his people.

### **Psalm 101**

Psalm 101 is a psalm of David which he speaks of his desire to rule with justice:

I will sing of steadfast love and justice;  
to you, O LORD, I will make music.  
I will ponder the way that is blameless. (Ps 101:1-2)

Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly  
I will destroy.  
Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart  
I will not endure. (Ps 101:5)

David speaks of wanting to use his judicial power to protect the weak and to conquer or punish violence and wickedness. David speaks of the type of king he wants to be. This prayer was partly answered in David's life—at his best he partially fulfilled this ideal. But of course, only Jesus Christ fully fulfills these words as we see his just and righteous rule that Psalms 45 and 72 also celebrate.

As Christians we can see here a portrait of the rule of Christ, but we can also see words that we pray will be increasingly true of ourselves—the king was to be a model Israelite, an exemplary believer. As we follow our king we can desire to be conformed to his likeness (2 Cor 3:18). And perhaps here we can see words that we can pray for those who rule—leaders in church, leaders in government. Words primarily fulfilled in the Davidic king Jesus Christ but nevertheless words that speak of what true leadership should look like.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I see this threefold pattern of fulfillment in Christ, in believers, and in those who lead suggested by C. John Collins, "Psalms," in *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, Wayne Grudem, J. I. Packer et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1064.

## Psalm 110

The final royal psalm to consider is Psalm 110, which is another psalm of David. Psalm 110 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament. This is a psalm where David speaks *as* king but speaks of *another* king. David speaks and says,

The LORD says to my Lord:  
“Sit at my right hand,  
until I make your enemies your footstool.” (Ps 110:1)

This seems to be the only psalm where David speaks in an explicitly prophetic way. In all the Psalms I have considered David has been himself a pattern (or a “type”) of the king to come—Jesus. These psalms have all been partially fulfilled in David or Solomon (and possibly other kings along the way) but ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 110 is quite distinct. David realizes the king to come is very *different* to him. David refers to this king as his *Lord*. David knew he had an heir promised from the words in 2 Samuel 7, and here David speaks prophetically seeing that this king to come will be so much greater than the kings of David’s line.

All the other royal psalms would have made sense to the people of the time—these were words about the king in Israel. Psalm 110 would have made the people ask, “Who is this king and ‘Lord’ that David speaks about?” For all their glory, neither David nor Solomon nor any other king who followed came close to fulfilling this psalm.

The king described in Psalm 110 is like the king of Psalms 2, 45, and 72—but so much more. This king will sit at the LORD’s right hand until his enemies are made a footstool—we have seen that in Psalm 2. This will rule in the midst of his enemies (v. 2), this king will have nations bowing down to him (v. 3) but more than that we hear of this king:

The LORD has sworn  
and will not change his mind,  
“You are a priest forever  
after the order of Melchizedek.” (Ps 110:4)



In Israel the roles of king and priest had been divided. This was a very wise separation of powers so no king could gain too much authority. There were priests and prophets who could challenge the king's power and call them back to the ways of the LORD. Saul presented himself as a priest and offered sacrifices and was condemned for it. No king could take that role. Yet this king David speaks of is described as a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek. This king will be more than anything ever seen in the Davidic kings of David's line. At this point this is a psalm that even in David's day would have pointed people forward to the one who is to come. Even in David's day it would have been understood to be looking forward to the Messiah that we know is Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion: Royal Psalms**

The royal psalms are linked by their focus on the king, but they are in fact very different. Some speak of the king at his most glorious. Psalm 45 and 72 are words we so readily apply to Jesus Christ as they seem to so transcend the reality of the kingship of David and Solomon. Other words that speak of the people's desire for the king to be delivered and to reign that speak more at the human level knowing the fate of the people is bound up with the king (Pss 20, 21, and 132) where the people see the LORD will bless them only through this king and they pray for the continuation of this king's line. Psalm 132 is a prayer in faith where it seems like there is no king, or at least no king enjoying this sort of blessing.

But then other psalms where the king speaks. In Psalm 18 David speaks of his life and the victories God gave him. In Psalm 144 seemingly another king in David's line speaks and prays for the same sorts of victories and the accompanying blessings for the people. In Psalm 101 David speaks of the character that befits such a king; and in Psalm 110 David sees that him and his line have pictured something of the glories of kingship and God will use human kingship to bless his people. The king to come is so much more

than any of these kings because he is not simply king but priest. The one to come will restore these offices.

As we have seen in an earlier chapter, the Psalms speak of Christ in far more ways than just as the king in David's line. But the royal psalms are glorious and fresh pictures for us of our Savior Jesus Christ, and the blessings we have through being his people.

The fact that the king is the speaker of some psalms—though relatively few, I would argue—does not mean that we as his people can have no part in these psalms. The majority of these psalms speak of the king's victories on behalf of the people, victories and blessings we share through being Christ's people. The fact that the king is the speaker does not mean we say "these are not our words"; rather we say "these are Jesus' words *so that* they could become our words." It is not being less Christ-honoring to see the great blessings we receive as his people through his kingship. "In a multitude of people is the glory of a king" (Prov 14:28), and how much more glory is there for the king when that multitude are a *blessed* multitude, blessed in him whom all nations call blessed (Ps 72:17)!

## CHAPTER 14

### CONCLUSION: CHRIST-SATURATED SUBJECTIVE APPROPRIATION

Through the centuries, Christian believers have used the Psalms in prayer and worship, readily taking the words of the psalmists on their own lips, and often doing so in a subjective way—that is, appropriating them as their own words. We have seen that such an approach is entirely in line with the Psalms as they present themselves, as well as with how the New Testament authors use the Psalms. Any faithful exposition of a particular psalm will show its fulfilment in Christ, but this is not simply limited to seeing Christ as the singer. The psalmists (especially David) present themselves as being typological of the one to come, but also exemplary for the people. Some of the reasons that we may feel reluctant to take the Psalms on our own lips—claims to righteousness, talk of enemies, calls for judgment—are not the barriers we think, if we understand these concepts as they are understood in the Psalms themselves. In particular, if we read in the light of Biblical Theology, and God’s covenant promises, much of what is perplexing about the Psalms becomes clearer.

The Psalms teach us to praise, to lament, and to give thanks—as well as a whole host of other emotions. In teaching us how to relate to God in all seasons of life, the Psalms are not being “man-centered.” The Psalms contain a vast doctrine of God—more than any other Old Testament book, perhaps—and by seeing how the psalmists relate to *this God*, God’s greatness and glory is celebrated. As Christians, often our approach to the Psalms is not to say that the psalmists’ experiences are not our own. Rather, we find in the experience of the psalmists, words that fit the very movements of our soul. And far from saying the words apply *less* to us, in fact the reality is that often

we say “how much *more* is this true in light of Christ!” It is true that in the experiences of the psalmists we are given an extraordinary window into the humanity of Christ. But when the psalmists celebrate God as creator, how much more do we join in an celebrate Christ through whom and for whom all things were created! When the psalmists celebrate any deliverance, be it little or big, how much more as Christians do we see this as a lens into the greatest deliverance achieved for us by Christ at the cross. When psalmists facing trials say they will remember God’s works of old, how much more do we say we will remember the cross of Christ! And of course, when we read of the king—either speaking himself, or being spoken of by the people, how much more do we see the richer glories of our king in his beauty, Christ!

Christ is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the one in whom Christian believers enjoy every spiritual blessing. It is in this context that the Psalms may be subjectively appropriated—not to put the Christian believer at the center, but to recognize the extraordinary blessings of a God who says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Any focus on Christian experience—whether that of praise, lament, thanksgiving or anything else—is not to displace Christ but should lead believers to trace back up the sunbeams to God himself who is the source of every blessing. To him be glory forever.

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## ABSTRACT

### “THIS IS MY STORY; THIS IS MY SONG”: THE SUBJECTIVE USE OF THE PSALMS BY CHRISTIANS TODAY

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The main argument of this thesis is that the Psalms are words graciously given by God for believers to use when they pray to him. There are words here for all seasons. In recent years there has been a growing trend to see the words of the Psalms as belonging on Christ’s lips only, not the believer’s. There is a good desire here, as one must take seriously Jesus’ words about the Old Testament that these are the Scriptures that “bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

This thesis argues that seeing the Psalms as being “the words of Jesus” and thus only secondarily intended for use by Christian believers is not the picture presented by the Psalms themselves, nor the New Testament use of the Psalms. The goal of this thesis is to give Christians confidence in reading, praying, and singing the Psalms. Chapters 2-3 lay some groundwork, introducing the world of poetry (chap. 2) and song (chap. 3). Chapters 4-9 seek to defend the subjective use of the Psalms. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the testimony of the Psalms themselves (chap. 4) and the New Testament use of the Psalms (chap. 5). The psalmists themselves at times see themselves as examples for believers (not merely prophetic of one to come), and the New Testament authors also read the Psalms in such a way. The next three chapters address some of the issues that might make Christians believe that some psalms cannot be properly taken on their own lips: claims to righteousness (chap. 6), enemies (chap. 7), and praying for judgment

(chap. 8). Chapter 9 shows that being prepared to use the Psalms in this subjective way (and thus not see Christ as the singer of every psalm) does not rule out Christ-centered interpretation, but allows for more and richer avenues of fulfilment in Christ; he is seen not only as the singer but as God, as the one who achieves the salvation of which the Psalms speak, and as the human king.

Chapters 10-13 consider different types of psalm, and for each looks at how psalms like this may be read and understood. For each type of psalm, consideration of typical features of this sort of psalm is accompanied by reflection on how Christians can engage with such a psalm, often using a *'how much more in Christ'* hermeneutic.

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