

# Teach us *to* Pray



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ps. 105:5, Col. 3:16, James 5:13, Psalm 44, Psalm 22, Psalm 13, Ps. 60:1–5.*

**Memory Text:** “Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples’ ” (*Luke 11:1, NKJV*).

A belief that only spontaneous, unlearned prayer is real prayer appears to be prevalent among some Christians. However, Jesus’ disciples were immensely rewarded when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. God placed a prayer book, the Psalms, at the heart of the Bible, not simply to show us how God’s people of ancient times prayed but also to teach us how we can pray today.

From the earliest ages, the Psalms have shaped the prayers of God’s people, including Jesus’ prayers (*1 Chron. 16:7, 9; Neh. 12:8; Matt. 27:46; Eph. 5:19*). This week we will look at the role the Psalms played in helping God’s people traverse their life journey and grow in their relationship with God. We should remember that the Psalms are prayers and, as such, are invaluable, not only for their theological insight but also for the ways they can enrich and transform our individual and communal prayers.

Praying the Psalms has helped many believers establish and maintain regular and fulfilling prayer lives.

This week we will continue to look at the Psalms, especially in the context of times when things are not going great for us.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 13.

## Fostering the Use of the Psalms in Prayer

**Read** Psalm 105:5, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13. What is the place of the Psalms in the believer's worship experience?

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A simple way of introducing the Psalms into daily life is to devote time each day to the reading of a psalm, beginning with Psalm 1, and following the order given in the psalter. Another way is to read the psalms that correspond to your present situation, whatever it happens to be: there are psalms of lament, the psalms of communal lament, the thanksgiving psalms, hymns, penitential psalms, the wisdom psalms (seeking God's wisdom and guidance), historical psalms, psalms containing anger and rage, and pilgrimage psalms. Over the course of this quarter, we will be looking at many of them and studying these psalms in the context in which they appear.

How, then, are we to read the Psalms?

First read the psalm, engaging in simple reflection, and then pray. Ruminating over the psalm involves reflection on the various aspects of the psalm: the way the psalmist addresses God and the reasons for the prayer. Consider how your situation corresponds to the psalmist's experience and how the psalm might be able to help you articulate your experience. You will be amazed at how often you will find yourself being able to resonate and relate to what you read there.

If something in the psalm challenges you, ponder, for example, whether the psalm corrects your present false hopes about something you are facing. Contemplate the psalm's message in the light of Christ's person and salvific work and the long-term hope Christ's work offers us. As we know, or should know, it always helps to look at everything in the Bible in light of Christ and the Cross.

Also, look for new motives for prayer that the psalm supplies, and think about their importance for you, your church, and the world. Ask God to put His Word on your heart and mind. If the psalm corresponds to the situation of someone you know, intercede in prayer for that person. The point is, the Psalms cover so many aspects of life, and we can be enriched by reading and absorbing into our hearts what they are saying to us.

**What does it mean to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16)? Why is reading the Bible the first and most crucial step for that experience?**

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## Trust in Times of Trouble

All Christians know, and have experienced, times of despair and suffering, times when they have wondered what the Lord is doing, or why the Lord is allowing these things to happen to them. The psalmists themselves went through similar things. And, through divine inspiration, they recorded what they had experienced.

**Read Psalm 44. What is it saying to us, and why is this relevant to believers in all ages?**

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The selectiveness of Psalms in church worship services often reflects the exclusiveness of moods and words that we express in our communal prayers. Such restrictiveness may be a sign of our inability or uneasiness to engage the dark realities of life. Though we may sometimes feel that God treats us unfairly when suffering hits us, we do not find it appropriate to express our thoughts in public worship or even in private prayer.

This reluctance could cause us to miss the point of worship. The failure to express honestly and openly our feelings and views before God in prayer often leaves us in bondage to our own emotions. This also denies us confidence and trust in approaching God. Praying the Psalms gives an assurance that, when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny our experience.

Psalm 44, for example, can help worshipers articulate their experience of innocent suffering freely and adequately. Praying the Psalms helps people experience freedom of speech in prayer. The Psalms give us words that we can neither find nor dare to speak. “Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way; but You have severely broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death” (*Ps. 44:18, 19, NKJV*).

Notice, however, how Psalm 44 begins. The writer is talking about how, in the past, God had done great things for His people. Hence, the author expresses his trust in God and not “in my bow” (*Ps. 44:6*).

Despite this, trouble has still come to God’s people. The list of woe and lament is long and painful. However, even amid all this, the psalmist cries out for God to deliver, to “redeem us for Your mercies’ sake” (*Ps. 44:26, NKJV*). That is, even amid the trouble, he knows the reality of God and His love.

**How can drawing on past times, when God’s presence felt very real, help you deal with the times in which troubles make you think that God is far away?**

## A Psalm of Despair

Praying the Psalms does more than enable worshipers to articulate their prayers freely. The Psalms supervise their experience according to God's standards and make it bearable by introducing hope and reassurance of God's presence.

**Read** Psalm 22. What can we learn from this psalm about trust in God amid great suffering?

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The lamenting words of Psalm 22:1 may help suffering people express their grief and sense of loneliness: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?" (*NKJV*).

These words, of course, have become famous among Christians because they were the same words that Jesus Himself, while on the cross, uttered, showing us how central to Christ's experience the Psalms were (*see Matt. 27:46*).

However, even amid the suffering and trials, these words also are expressed: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (*Ps. 22:22, NKJV*).

In other words, though these exact feelings may not coincide with the author's present dilemma, the psalmist was still expressing his faith in God and declaring that, no matter what, he would still praise God.

The point is, by giving us words to pray, the Psalms teach us to look beyond our current situation and, by faith, to see the time when our life will be restored by God's grace.

Praying the Psalms thus takes worshipers to new spiritual horizons. The Psalms let worshipers express their feelings and understandings, but they are not left where they presently are. The worshipers are led to abandon their burdens of pain, disappointment, anger, and despair before God and to trust in Him, whatever their circumstances.

The movement from lament to praise observed in many psalms is suggestive of the spiritual transformation that the believers experience when they receive divine grace and comfort in prayer.

**How can we learn to see beyond our immediate trials and, thus, trust in God's goodness, whatever we face now?**

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## From Despair to Hope

We all have probably faced times when the presence of God seemed very far from us. Who, at times, has not thought: *How could this have happened?*

The psalmists, humans like the rest of us, surely faced similar things. Though, yes, at times our sins bring trials upon us, at other times they seem to be so unfair, and we feel as if we did not deserve what we are now faced with. Again, who has not been there?

**Read** Psalm 13. What two main moods can you distinguish in this psalm? What decision do you think brought the radical change in the psalmist's general outlook?

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“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?” (*Ps. 13:1, NKJV*). Again, who cannot relate to these sentiments, as wrong as they might be? (Does God ever forget any of us?)

Psalm 13, then, points to the way to avoid another common mistake—focusing on ourselves and our problems when praying. This psalm can transform our prayer by leading us to reaffirm the faithful and unchanging nature of God's dealings with His people.

Sure, though the psalm does begin with laments and complaints, it does not end there. And that's the crucial point.

The psalm leads us to deliberately choose to trust God's redemptive power (*Ps. 13:5*), so that our fear and anxiety (*Ps. 13:1–4*) can gradually give way to God's salvation, and we begin experiencing change from lament to praise, from despair to hope (*Ps. 13:5, 6*).

However, a mere repetition of the words of the Psalms with only a slight comprehension of their meaning will not produce the authentic transformation intended by their use. When praying the Psalms, we should seek the Holy Spirit to enable us to act in the way demanded by the psalm. The Psalms are the Word of God by which believers' characters and actions are transformed, not simply informed. By God's grace, the promises of the Psalms are made manifest in the lives of believers. This means that we allow God's Word to shape us according to God's will and to unite us with Christ, who demonstrated God's will perfectly and, as the incarnate Son of God, prayed the Psalms, as well.

**How can your trials draw you closer to God? Why, if you're not careful, can they push you away from Him?**

## Oh, Restore Us Again

**Read** Psalm 60:1–5. For what occasions do you think this psalm would be a suitable prayer? How can we benefit from the psalms of lament even in joyous seasons of life?

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Psalms of lament are generally understood as prayers of people living through trying times, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. Or all three.

However, this does not mean that we should avoid these psalms, even in good times. Sometimes there may be a total disjunction between the words of the psalm and the worshiper's present experience. That is, psalms of lament can be beneficial to worshipers who are not in distress.

First, they can make us more aware that suffering is part of the general human experience and that it happens to both the righteous and the wicked. The Psalms assure us that God is in control and provides strength and solutions in times of trouble. Even in this psalm, even amid the trouble ("You have made the earth tremble," *Ps. 60:2, NKJV*), the psalmist displays his ultimate hope in God's deliverance.

Second, the lament psalms teach us compassion toward the sufferers. When expressing our happiness and gratitude to God, especially in public, we must be mindful of the less fortunate. Sure, we might have things good right now, but who doesn't know of people, all around us, who are suffering terribly? Praying such psalms can help us not forget those who are going through tough times. The Psalms should evoke in us compassion and a desire to minister to the suffering as Jesus did.

"This world is a vast lazar house, but Christ came to heal the sick, to proclaim deliverance to the captives of Satan. He was in Himself health and strength. He imparted His life to the sick, the afflicted, those possessed of demons. He turned away none who came to receive His healing power. He knew that those who petitioned Him for help had brought disease upon themselves; yet, He did not refuse to heal them. And when virtue from Christ entered into these poor souls, they were convicted of sin, and many were healed of their spiritual disease, as well as of their physical maladies. The gospel still possesses the same power, and why should we not today witness the same results?"—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, pp. 24, 25.

**Whom do you know, right now, who needs not only your prayers but your ministering touch, as well?**

**Further Thought:** Read Psalm 42:8 and Ellen G. White, “Poetry and Song,” pp. 159–168, in *Education*. How are prayer and song related according to these inspired texts?

Ellen G. White describes David’s penitent psalms (e.g. *Psalm 51*) as the language of his soul and prayers that illustrate the nature of true sorrow for sin (see *Steps to Christ*, pp. 24, 25). She encourages believers to memorize texts from the Psalms as the means of fostering the sense of God’s presence in their lives and highlights Jesus’ practice of lifting His voice with psalms when met with temptation and oppressive fear. She also remarks: “How often by words of holy song are unsealed in the soul the springs of penitence and faith, of hope and love and joy! . . . Indeed, many a song is prayer.”—*Education*, pp. 162–168.

When we pray and sing the Psalms, we assume the persistence, boldness, courage, and hope of the psalmists. They encourage us to continue our spiritual journey and comfort us that we are not alone. Other people, like us, have gone through dark times and yet were triumphant by the grace of God. At the same time, the Psalms reveal to us the glimpses of Christ’s fervent intercession on our behalf, as He always lives to pray for us (*Heb. 7:25*).

Engaging psalms in prayer and worship makes the believing community aware of the full range of human experience and teaches the worshipers to engage in the various facets of that experience in worship. The Psalms are divine-human prayers and songs. For that reason, including psalms consistently in worship brings the believing community to the center of God’s will and powerful healing grace.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is spontaneous, unguided prayer not the only way to pray? How can our prayer life benefit from the Psalms, the biblical prayers?
- 2 How can the Psalms enrich our communal prayer experience? Discuss some practical ways your local church can foster the use of the Psalms in its worship services.
- 3 What do the Psalms reveal about the complexity of the human pilgrimage of faith and the power of God’s healing grace?