

# When Words Fail

## The Blessed Practice of Praying the Psalms

By Tricia McCary Rhodes



A predawn hush enfolded me like a shroud as I thumbed listlessly through my Bible. Another sleepless night—the minutes and hours dragging on as I waited in silence for a God who would not speak. Beyond brokenness, I was numb. When the words of the psalmist David caught my eye, long-bottled-up tears threatened to erupt:

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God's house we walked in the throng (Ps. 55:12–14, ESV).

In that brief moment I grasped that God was deeply acquainted with the pain that had engulfed me since the betrayal by a dear friend of many years, a companion with whom I'd shared passions and pursued dreams and labored shoulder to shoulder in ministry. Looking back to the beginning of the psalm, I opened my mouth, finding there the words to express the gamut of emotions I'd tried so hard to bury—anger, sorrow,

bitterness, confusion, frustration, and above all, hurt. I was undone.

I am thankful that my relationship with the Psalms transcends the ritual readings of my childhood or joyful releases in worship. They have become both a source for insight in prayer and a primer on how to stand brutally honest before God. A deep personal engagement with the Psalms is something that theologian Walter Brueggemann contends can be normal for each of us, given that they reflect a journey common to all of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, Brueggemann suggests that our lives follow a rhythm that is always moving from orientation to disorientation to reorientation, and that through the Psalms, God has provided a way for us to form prayers for each, discovering in the process those hidden treasures in our relationship with Him.

## **Orientation—When All Is Well**

Orientation describes those unique times when we feel good about how things are going—when confidence comes easy, when a sense of stability, particularly in our walk with God, permeates our hearts and minds. We look at the stars above and proclaim: “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1).

These are times when we experience the joy of friendship and affirm in prayer: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). We are able to testify honestly: “The word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does” (Ps. 33:4). These times may seem all too uncommon and our tendency can be to commune with God haphazardly during them, lacking awareness of our need.

The Psalms remind us, however, that there are hundreds of ways to express our hearts to God from this place of equilibrium.

As we do, our joy in Him deepens—a vital precursor to the inevitable moment when our world collapses and we enter a season of disorientation.

## **Disorientation—Wounded Hearts and Shattered Days**

The betrayal I wrote about previously was one in a series of events that turned my world upside down. Beyond a litany of painful circumstances, I could not experience the presence of God—not in worship services or quiet times or hours of sleepless nights or endless, unpredictable days. Disorientation seasons are like this—we feel shattered, wondering if God has abandoned us.

While our religious training can cause us to deny or cover up our feelings with spiritual platitudes, the Psalms insist that God welcomes our questions, our raw candor, even our childlike demands: “Lord, you have seen this; do not be silent. Do not be far from me, Lord. Awake, and rise to my defense! Contend for me, my God and Lord. Vindicate me in your righteousness, Lord my God” (Ps. 35:22–24).

As the days drag on and hope wanes, we cry out with David: “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps. 13:1). In desperation, we may throw up our hands and pray the words Jesus Himself uttered from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” (Ps. 22:1). At some point we might even bargain, reminding God that His reputation is on the line if He doesn’t do something: “For your name’s sake, Lord, preserve my life” (Ps. 143:11).

The beauty, of course, is that in His sovereign wisdom and time, God does intervene, stunning us with His presence as we enter the season of reorientation.

## **Reorientation—Surprised by Joy**

A friend called the other day, unable to contain herself about all God was doing in her life. While the victories had not come without struggle, she now found herself whirling daily in a vortex of divine love. Like the psalmist, she wanted to shout from the mountaintop: “Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (Ps. 66:16).

Seasons of reorientation are like that. God catches us off guard and we can't quite believe His goodness. We haven't forgotten the pain of the past, but God's presence is sweeter in light of it. Beyond being grateful, we are effusive about His goodness: “Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord” (Ps. 27:6).

While we aren't sure why this is happening or how long it will last, we proclaim eagerly: “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever” (Ps. 30:11–12). Because no one could sustain this euphoric experience indefinitely, we will at some point move back into the more normal orientation to life. But for each step along the way, not only do the Psalms offer us the words we may lack, but in praying them, we glean many other benefits.

## **The Profound Benefits**

Space does not allow a thorough exposition of the multiform blessings in praying the Psalms, but here are a few that mean the most to me. When we pray the Psalms:

- We pray in words inspired by the Holy Spirit. Since all Scripture is God-breathed, we can experience joyful reverence at the reality that our prayers from the Psalms were in the heart of God before the foundation of

the earth.

- We experience unity with Christ. Jesus would have prayed many of Scripture's psalms as part of His Jewish heritage. In our own pilgrimage, we offer up the Psalms of Ascent (120–134), in awe that Jesus prayed these same words as He journeyed toward Jerusalem. Identifying with the incarnate Christ, we agree in prayer: "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope" (Ps. 130:5).
- We learn spiritual disciplines like meditation and contemplation. David, the man after God's own heart, was the master of meditation and contemplation because these were the disciplines that drew him into God's embrace: "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done. I spread out my hands to you; I thirst for you like a parched land" (Ps. 143:5–6). David's prayers demonstrate a deep, reflective relationship with God. By praying them, we can practice these disciplines until they become our own.
- We expand our understanding of God. Most of us have a limited vocabulary when it comes to exalting God for who He is, but the Psalms offer us an endless supply of options. Last year I prayed through the Psalms chronologically and was astounded at the breadth of description I found. When I discovered more than 20 attributes of God in Psalm 145 alone, I memorized it, internalizing an endless supply of meditative material.

Recently I heard theologian N.T. Wright suggest, "Without the Psalms we are just not equipped to be humans, let alone Christians."<sup>2</sup>

In praying the Psalms we gain a deeper connection with the people in our world and all that they experience on a daily basis, adding "a voice to the common elation, shared grief, and communal rage that besets us all."<sup>3</sup> But even more powerful

is the reality that in praying the Psalms we gain a more profound understanding of what it means to walk with Christ. Nothing motivates me more in my Christian life than to pick up my Bible and plant myself in the Psalms as I pray.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 2-3.<sup>2</sup>N. T. Wright, *N.T. Wright on Scripture in Worship*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jf5uJf62eR8>.<sup>3</sup>Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2.

TRICIA RHODES is an adjunct professor of practical theology at Fuller Seminary. She ministers with her husband Joel at New Hope Church in San Diego, CA. She is the author of several books, including *The Wired Soul: Finding Spiritual Balance in a HyperConnected World*, just released by NavPress.

## **Not All Psalms Are the Same**

Praying the Psalms can be messy. We feel uncomfortable complaining in the presence of God, much less demanding He wreak vengeance on someone else. Common sense, as well as theological tradition, can help us know how and when to pray any given psalm. Here is a brief overview of some categories that might be helpful:

**Psalms of Lament:** These arise from some crisis and usually follow a structure that names the problem, asks for intervention, and ends by affirming God's trustworthiness. These missives are emotional and honest, providing us a way to express our own sadness, fear, anger, or confusion when things go wrong. We find spiritual sustenance as we move from candidly naming our pain to reaffirming our trust in God. (See Psalms 3, 4, 5, 22, 39, 53, 120, 142.)

**Imprecatory (cursing) Psalms:** These are a subcategory of the Lament Psalms, but are unique in that they demand action

against our enemies. Theologians differ on how we should approach these. Some insist that under the new covenant, we should not pray them at all, particularly given Jesus' words to love our enemies. Others suggest we re-form them in metaphorical ways so that we can pray them authentically. For example, we might reword Psalm 137:8–9 that says: "O daughter of Babylon . . . Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (esv) and instead pray: "Lord bless those who are not afraid to take a strong stand against the injustices caused by Satan's schemes in this world." (See Psalms 35, 69, 83, 88, 109, 137, 140.)

**Thanksgiving Psalms:** Both individual and communal expressions of gratitude permeate the Psalms and they often include a description of some difficulty—and then an emotive, joy-filled expression of gratitude for God's intervention. (See Psalms 18, 21, 30, 75, 107, 116, 118, 124, 138.)

**Hymns:** While any of the psalms can be put to music, some were specifically written as songs and thus lend themselves more easily to worship. Focused on who God is, these psalms are valuable for reminding us of God's saving actions throughout history and helping us remain God-centered in our prayers. (See Psalms 33, 95, 100, 111, 117, 145, 149, 150.)

**Wisdom Psalms:** These psalms tell us how we ought to live, what a just world looks like, and what it means to follow a holy God. While they are not usually direct prayers, they are easy to transform into personal prayer while instilling in us a stronger sense of God's ways. (See Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 128, 133.)