

## Psalms – Prayers for Seasons of Life

It's my privilege to bring the message from Scripture today. I want to thank Reverend Grant for the invitation to share this morning. For those of you who don't know me my name is John Harris and along with my wife Kathy we have been a part of All Saints Amersfoort for the last two years. We have two adult sons Andre and Dane. I am a missionary serving with International Teams and am based here in the Netherlands overseeing our Dutch missionaries serving among the poor and marginalised in various places across the world sharing the hope of Jesus in word and deed.

What is your most favourite book of the Bible? I'm guessing Leviticus and Ecclesiastes are not on the list?! For me I love most things Old Testament. In most surveys one book usually tops the list – Psalms.

In this message I want to explore using the psalms in our prayer and worship during different seasons of life.

Psalms are an intimate and honest dialogue between people and God, and between God and God's people. They express the full range of people's experience, emotion, and thoughts as children of God. They give us words to use in worship and prayer that seem to capture and express how we think and feel in those moments.

Worship is not just about what we do in church – an aspect of worship is turning our attention from ourselves to God, recognising who God is, and who we are. We can worship in many ways and prayer is one of those ways. Prayer is not just a shopping list spoken to God but an orientation to life and faith where we can express all our thoughts, dreams, desires to God. What the psalms do is to make a connection between prayer and worship. Of turning attention to God in every circumstance of life and expressing our praise, thanks, our hopes, our fears and doubts to God, the one who loves us deeply.

So let's jump into the psalms that we can use as prayers – I will look at three snapshots of psalms:

### **Psalm 19 – song of praise**

Have you ever seen a sunset or a scene in nature that was just awe inspiring? There are those moments in life when we see, feel or experience an overwhelming sense of joy, and something wells up within us that we need to express.

Psalm 19 is one of the many psalms of praise in Scripture. Psalm 19 captures one of those joy filled moments. It opens with: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.* The psalmist declares that all creation points to the glory and wonder of who God is as Creator and sustainer. It is such a joyful opening start to the psalm.

The psalmist then proceeds to praise God for God's laws acknowledging their wisdom in providing healthy and just ways to live: *The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.* (v7-8)

The psalmist ends the psalm with: *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight...* Their praises have been offered to God in prayer and worship.

It is good to turn those moments of pure joy into praise to God like the psalmist does. The psalms act to help us express those moments in prayer and worship to God.

### **Psalm 13 – prayers of lament**

However, we all know that life is not one long praise session. There are seasons in life and our faith that are tough and the psalms are a place we can turn to in those moments.

The most common type of psalm in the Book of Psalms is the lament – the cry out to God in pain and sadness.

Psalm 13 is one of the psalms of lament. It opens with the cry to God – *how long O Lord*. This is repeated not once but 4 times in the opening two verses.

It is not clear in the psalm what the person is facing but it is named as ‘the enemy’. It could be a physical enemy or perhaps an illness. Whichever it is the psalmist feels like the enemy has the upper hand in the battle to the point where death is at the door.

The psalmist writes: *Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?* This is not just a momentary thing, but it seems like it has gone on for a long time. It is deep and it is painful. You can hear the sorrow, frustration and sense of abandonment in these verses.

I think there are moments, and yes even long seasons in our life and faith, when we face struggles, doubts or fears that seem to overwhelm us. In my own life I have dealt with cancer, depression, and a five-year long battle for our residency permits. There have been times it felt like God had left the room and turned out the light. Maybe some of you are in one of those seasons now – ill health, being out of work, personal or family struggles – all of these things can overwhelm us and seem unending. Like the psalmist they can leave us feeling cut off from or even abandoned by God.

Yet let’s look at the how the psalmist engages with the struggles they face.

- They direct their frustrations, doubts and pain to God – they don’t stop talking to God but turn to God to express what they feel – these psalms give us permission to turn to God and express exactly how we feel – they are real, they are honest so we can be real and honest with God
- They call on God to look at them and answer their pleas – they recognise that only God can deliver them from their situation even while struggling with doubts that God even hears or sees them
- But they also look to the future with a degree of hope based on past experience – *I have trusted in your unfailing love* writes the psalmist in verse 5 – they have experienced God’s goodness and love in the past and even though in the present they cannot see it they in faith look to the future with hope.
  - I will sing – maybe they cannot do that now but in a statement of faith they trust that God will see, hear and respond

These psalms of lament have been written and included in Scripture to give voice to those moments or seasons when things are not how we feel they should be. They give us permission to passionately express our doubts, frustrations and even anger to God. Prayer and worship come together as we turn our attention towards God and honestly express our deepest thoughts to God as the one loves

and cares. They encourage us in our hopelessness to remember *how God has been faithful in the past*, and encourage us *to have hope that we will once again be able to praise to God for his deliverance from our present struggles even when we can't see it*.

### **Psalm 30 – prayers of thanksgiving**

Yet there are also times in our life when we experience breakthrough, a change in our circumstances for the better. Psalms provide a rich resource for us to express our thanks to God.

One such psalm is Psalm 30. We read in verse 2, 3, 9, and 11 that the psalmist fearing their life was at an end had cried out to God. However, they have now experienced healing and give thanks to God for that breakthrough.

The psalmist expresses those moments of breakthrough in the well-known verses: *weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning (v5)* and *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. (v11)*

Moments of healing and breakthrough give rise to thanks and praise to the One who has been with us through the darkness. There is a power in thanksgiving and praise that lifts us up and opens our hearts to God.

But the psalm importantly reveals that through the trials, lessons have been learned.

- In verse 6 the psalmist reflects that prior to their trial they had placed their confidence in material things, in their possessions. Through this experience they learned that confidence in possessions is misplaced. They can vanish like the morning mist. They learn to place their confidence in God.
- Another lesson is that psalmist learns to have an attitude of joy and thanksgiving in life. This comes through in their desire to praise God for all that God has done and for God as the source of life.

Through these three psalms we have seen three moments or seasons of life and faith captured and expressed – moments when things are going well, seasons that are tough and those moments when things have turned the corner and we experience breakthrough. These are life and faith experiences that we all share as humans, as God's people. The psalms are special I think since we can all relate in some way to what the psalmist is expressing.

The book of Psalms teaches us that worship is taking our eyes off ourselves and turning to God in recognition of who God is. Psalms teaches us that prayer is an honest dialogue with God. They teach us not to ignore the pain in our lives but to offer these up to God in our prayers. In doing so they subtly shift our focus from ourselves to God. But the psalms also teach us to look to God, to God's promises, and to God's presence in all our struggles and joys with hope. In fact, psalms encourage us to see God, acknowledge God in the midst of all of life through prayer and in doing so worship God.

As we go through our lives and faith we experience those moments and also seasons of joy, of fear, doubt and struggle but also times of breakthrough. For me, the psalms are a rich resource for my walk with God as they give words to those moments and allow me to connect with God in an honest way. Whatever season you are in may you find ways to both pray and worship authentically and find the Psalms an enriching place to turn to.